Bond of conveinence

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Bond of conveinence

by ChesapeakeStripper

Summary

Hannibal wishes to stay in America, but part of staying requires applying for a visa. Hence he decides the easiest way to forgo a background check is to simnply bond with an omega. He heads to New Orleans to purchase a mate, given the old traditions held. But he didn't expect to meet an omega like Will.

Chapter 1

Hannibal sat on the shade of the umbrella at the New Orleans Country Club. It was easy to view the beautiful omega women lounging in the sun. A shimmer of bronze to their fair skin, chatting away freely and casting a few glances and winks in Hannibal's direction. Some were just barely of age.

He'd been abandoned already by Donald Sutcliffe. His work colleague excused himself when a pretty beta had caught his eye. Hannibal didn't fall so readily for the women that tried to capture his attention. Or the omega men in the pool diving under to pop back up again and flash grins at him.

A few alphas close by were discussing what they wished to see some of the women in later that night for the debutante ball. Others were pleased with their current state of dress. Some of them just enjoyed to ogle them knowing nothing would come of it. They were serving themselves up in the hood of catching a wealthy alpha, showing their beauty was their only tool to catch their prey.

For Hannibal though, what he had seen so far held no fancy for him. He debated if taking the invitation had truly been a wise decision. The omegas believed he was simply after beauty when what he desired was out of reach for all of them.

To the omegas, he was just another alpha looking for a pretty mate. For Hannibal, the reason he attended was the same, but its purpose was a necessary part of staying in the States.

It is part of the reason Hannibal came to New Orleans. The South still held on to traditional views, a dowry expected for omegas. Married off and sent into the world to be the perfect mate after attending their finishing school.

Hannibal regretted listening to the story from his colleagues, stating how they were wonderfully schooled in cooking and for social occasions.

He didn't need a cook or a housemaid, a pretty thing on his shoulder to show off at parties. He did well on his own, always holding everyone's attention and envy.

He just needed permanent residency status without the scrutiny of a background check into his past. Without Inspector Pazzi trying to make his life in America as difficult as possible because of his preconceived notions he was Il Mostro.

Though he'd been released without charge, Pazzi never stopped following him after his release. It was only by coming to America that he was able to escape the man's attention.

"Would you like a refill, sir?"

"No thank you." Hannibal glanced at the hotel waitress and the bottle of red she held. The same as what Hannibal had been drinking.

She gave a curt nod and left.

Setting his empty glass on the table, he looked to the water, watching the boats bob in the water. Perhaps find where some of the other omegas were lounging. See if there was a diamond among the rough.

The rough waves and elegant yachts tethered to the mooring seemed to beckon him. The creak of old wood on the pier as he walked, weathered from many storms yet still standing.

A scent caught his nose, cinnamon with something wild about it. Turning, he watched something jump from a yacht. Dark curls ruffled in the breeze, some clinging to his head from the sweat, chest bare with beautiful dusty pink nipples.

Floral notes of verbena washed over Hannibal when the stranger looked at him. Bright blue eyes dazzling, young. Certainly no older than 20.

“Common whatcha do’in boy!” Someone yelled.

Said boy looked away, and caught the rope that came flying at him before he began to heave a pull. As it tightened, Hannibal saw the motor of the yacht rise up, being guided by another, same hair color, but bigger build.

Hannibal wondered if the verbena would bloom more if the boy was flushed. But there was no doubt he was omega.

“Put it down over there!” The older one shouted.

The boy did so, maneuvering the engine to the center of the pier and dropping it carefully.

“If you’re wanting ya motor fixed, there’s no space till next week.” The older man spoke to Hannibal before he looked a little more. “Unless ya paying cash for a quick fix, I can put you before someone else.”

“Unfortunately, I do not own a yacht.” Hannibal addressed him, then caught the look from the teenager. Something pierced him about the boy's hunger. Hitting him like an arrow in the chest, making him bleed like he was wounded, a feeling he hadn’t experienced before. Hannibal cocked his head before he looked away. “Not yet anyway.”

“Ya looking for one?” The man spoke, leaning in a little more. Eyes narrowing a fraction.

Hannibal saw his interest in money. “Yes,” he spoke, deciding to run along with it.

“William,” the man bellowed. The boy grimaced slightly. “Go show him the yacht at the end.”

Hannibal walked over without waiting for an invitation. Closing in on the omega, he allowed himself to bathe in that scent he was coming to enjoy already. At least he was beautiful so

far.

“Just call me Will, everyone else does, dad just calls me that.”

Hannibal watched the hand come out, rough and calloused, black stains from the oil and grease of the motors he no doubt worked on.

“Hannibal,”

The offered hand wasn’t taken, and Will bowed his head a fraction in shame. Shoulders falling before taking it away and muttering a sorry.

“I would normally reciprocate the gesture, unfortunately,” Hannibal was in cool colored linens that would easily stain. A lie given he wanted nothing more than to reach out and take Will's hand, to scent along his wrist and kiss the back of his hand to feel the beat of his heart in the arteries.

“Oh, yeah.” Will seems to appreciate the dishonest answer.

Hannibal smiled a fraction.

“You’re not from around here, huh.” Will smiled back before beginning to walk to the yacht his father had instructed him to.

“Maryland, Baltimore.” Hannibal supplied, knowing it was not exactly what Will had meant.

Will narrowed his eyes a fraction before he chuckled, looking down, then up through his lashes at Hannibal. “You’re European, but further north. Somewhere cold.”

Hannibal felt his smile grow a fraction, interest piquing. More so when the verbena scent grew sweeter. “Then I won’t give it away.”

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Viewing the yacht was a pointless endeavor. It was old and needed repairs. The motor worked well, but the style was too old. There was no kitchen. The scent of mold grew stronger the deeper in they went.

That and Hannibal didn’t truly want to buy a yacht. However, to be in Will’s company a little longer, he would.

Will was stunning. Intelligent and wanting to further himself educationally, currently denied by his status and lack of money. While Hannibal listened to Will talk about wanting to join law enforcement, he was fascinated, though he found himself admiring Will’s lithe form.

How Will could be so flexible in opening the hatch to go into the cabin, how he tilted his chin and bared his neck when he tightened the rope of the sails. The stretch of his body and how he turned, the dim light in the cabin made his eyes grow brighter and more alluring.

“I’ve been saving for the past year, but it’s not enough yet.” Will let out a sigh.

Hannibal felt his alpha instincts purr with the beauty of which Will closed his eyes to then open and look at him. Like he was the only one in the world to see him.

“Other states are more amenable to an omega enrolling in law enforcement, even having separate accommodations for them during their training.” Hannibal forced himself to look away, not because he wasn’t interested. The more he saw, the more he wanted to move forward and bite that sweet pale neck, sinking teeth into flesh to leave his mark to make others aware that this Adonis belonged to him.

“Yeah, but every academy’s admission process requires an omega’s partner or parent to sign off on it.” Will sighed.

Hannibal smirked a little, though when he spoke, his voice was borderline clinical. “Your father does not approve?”

Will canted his head like a cat, a pump of his eyebrows. The silent ‘of course not’.

“Then perhaps you should find someone that would be willing to accommodate to your needs,” Hannibal spoke as he watched Will lean against the wall in the cabin.

“What kind of alpha would allow me to enroll in the force and spend most of my time chasing criminals or walking the beat,” Will spoke.

It was well known that omegas in Louisiana were to married off, more for alphas to start families. Those who were not so fortunate were sold to brothels, and sent into a life of servitude for any alpha in need of a mate for their rut.

“What money have you saved so far?” Hannibal asked, watching Will’s face falter slightly.

“I had a bit, before.”

“Before what exactly?” Hannibal spoke, wondering what Will had spent it on, seeing the guilt in his face.

“I found a dog, a stray. He was sick, I got him treatment, and medication for his heart. Diuretics.”

Hannibal could guess there was an issue with fluid overload in the circulatory system given the drug was used to reduce fluid volume. “It cost more than you expected?”

“I didn’t mind spending the money on him,” Will admitted, a small smile. “He was happier.”

“How long ago did he pass away?” Hannibal asked.

“Two weeks,” Will brought his arms up to his chest, more self-comforting. “I knew it was coming, he was older. I’m just glad he felt loved before he passed.”

Hannibal gave a nod, more akin to understanding. He could see Will crouching down to feed the stray. Giving it the food from his plate, the scraps, and whatever he could find. Then he could also read between the lines of Will’s story, though he stayed, a dog did not truly hold him back. But a parent would.

Will’s life in Louisiana was destined to be dragged from boat yard to boat yard with his father, who used to fix motors and put food on their table. Barely scraping by from the ribs Hannibal could see.

“What bought you here from Baltimore?” Will asked, changing the topic.

“New Orleans Débutante ball, a friend insisted I attend,” Hannibal spoke with an element of truth. Though he watched Will’s face fall a little.

“Oh,”

Hannibal felt something within him twist, seeing the seeds of hope, Will’s desire in him. Already under the belief he wouldn’t be good enough compared to the omegas who would attend the ball. “I suppose you are more of a traditionalist then?”

“Hardly,” Hannibal smirked, watching Will almost do a double take.

“Then why come to the south?” Will tilted his head, eyes lifting.

The question was hopeful, that perhaps Hannibal would look past the other omega’s. To see Will instead. Will’s eyes held hope of a future when he looked at him, though it suddenly broke.

“What do you think of her?” Will’s father came into the cabin.

Will moved off the wall, standing straight and looking down automatically. Swallowing, hands down by his sides.

“Did William show you around?”

“He did, though unfortunately, it is not to my taste.” Hannibal gave a polite nod. “I didn’t catch your name?”

“Bill,” A rough hand was shown, more calloused than Will’s own, but not as dirty. Yellowed fingers from years of smoking. Alcoholism made itself known by the slight tremor it had when they shook. “Bill Graham.”

“Do you have a business card, if I do end up buying a yacht, having someone local to fix the motor and set it up would be useful,” Hannibal spoke, missing Will’s voice, though watching how he winked away into the shadows. He wondered what happened behind closed doors, more so when Bill kept Will in his peripheral vision. Never letting him from his sight.

“I do,” Bill spoke, a glint of money in his eyes. A piece of paper was torn off a letter, Bill scribbled his name and number before passing it over.

Hannibal took the paper, a glimpse of ‘past due’ just noticeable on the tattered edge. Still, he put it in his pocket as though it was a proper card, then he bid them a polite farewell.

As he stepped onto the pier, he caught the look Bill gave him, before it turned to one of annoyance as he grumbled under his breath at Will. The omega shrank back, shoulders hunching as he seemed to plead.

It was unusual to see a beta father an omega, Hannibal briefly wondered if Will's mother was an omega herself. More importantly, why she was not in the picture. Hannibal hadn't detected any other scents upon Will, showing he was technically living alone, only his beta father.

As he returned to the bar, Donald Sutcliffe spotted him, walking over quickly with a girl attached to his arm.

"I see you have been out observing the local fauna." Donald wiggled his eyebrows.

Hannibal didn't rise to the bait, but the girl on his arm scoffed.

"Bill and Will Graham, hardly fauna, more swamp rats. That kid is weird, mimics people's speech, too opinionated for his own good. That and their thieves!" She said with her nose in the air, as though she was far superior.

"See, Emily knows this place well." Donald smiled, grabbing Emily's waist and pulling her closer for a kiss.

"And I'm sure Mandy has things settled at home in your absence." Hannibal looked to the bartender, smirking as he heard the stomp of Emily's heels.

"You said you were single!"

"That's just something he always does when I get a girl and he's alone."

The clack of heels and slight commotion made Hannibal grin, ordering his drink as he scented the wine and sipped, turning back to see Donald watching after her.

“Remind me to never invite you along to one of these again.” Donald straightened his shirt, flagging the bartender himself. Cheeks reddened, a desire to yell, though they both knew he’d gone for a beta instead of an omega.

It was something Donald did frequently, when he was away, his mate at home. He’d wine and dine a beta woman, lavish her in attention, rut himself to completion several times and do things that his omega partner did not enjoy before cutting ties with the woman and returning home to his mate happy and sated with their bond for another 6 months. Mandy was none the wiser, or perhaps she was but resigned herself to the arrangement. Perhaps Donald always simply chose beta women due to the inability to leave a scent behind and pick up on a mated alpha.

Hannibal stayed quiet while Donald ordered his own drink, savoring his wine as he contemplated what he had seen so far.

It had been 4 years since he had left France and traveled to America. His residency at Johns Hopkins was coming to an end, there was a contract on the table for him to stay.

A decent salary was offered, the ability to expand his knowledge with the opportunity the hospital would afford him. It was the leading hospital in the states, Hannibal’s success rate in his surgeries so far was the best they had seen.

The only thing holding Hannibal back was applying for permanent residency. It would mean there would be a background check, looking into his past and his link to Il Mostro in France.

Though he was never arrested or charged, he was still detained by Inspector Pazzi. It would show up due on reports, the immigration office would look further.

They would talk to Pazzi, he would share his suspicions, the belief he was Il Mostro. It would be recorded due to his status in the police force.

While Hannibal did not feel a threat from the knowledge being known, given nothing was ever proven. He also did not need scrutiny, now or in the future. The less suspicion upon him would be better.

The student Visa he had acquired to come to the States would expire in a few weeks. It was far easier to acquire the student visa, all he needed was proof of scholarship or to show he was enrolled in a University program. The residency had met this criteria. He wouldn't be able to apply for another, given his studies were finished. Applying for a working visa would still see a background check conducted.

The one way he could avoid a background check was the find an omega mate. To apply for permanent residency through marriage or bonding. Marriage was only available for betas. Alphas and omegas could only gain it through bonding.

Hence he used his free weekend to travel to Louisiana to buy a mate. Something he frowned upon, but with such little time remaining and even less desire to return to Europe so soon, there was a lack of options available.

The South still held onto old traditions, asking a dowry for their omega's. The poorer the family, the less scrutiny, and dowry being asked. The fewer questions asked or expectations set.

Hannibal normally would never have considered buying a mate, a belief he could never find someone that would measure up to his intelligence, and expectations of beauty and elegance. Or understanding of him. The ability to look at him with love and devotion that many omegas did with their alphas.

If they knew what he was, what he did, they would run away screaming or die by his hand trying to escape.

"So, who's this Will?"

Donald broke Hannibal's thoughts, blue eyes sparkling at the forefront of Hannibal's mind. How stunning he looked in the sun and leaning against the wall to show off his body. How he

dipped his chin to look up through his lashes.

“An omega I met on the moorings. He was hoping to sell a yacht.” Hannibal sipped his wine.

Donald huffed a laugh, smiling wider. “What that all he was selling?”

“He was not as forward as the Emily you were with.” Hannibal grinned a little.

“That’s what they all want here, a wealthy mate to give them a lavish life.” Donald threw back his own drink, hand up for another.

“Could one be blamed when brought into a situation they have no control in?” Hannibal intoned.

“Suppose when you put it like that.”

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The ball itself was beautifully decorated, alcohol flowed freely, and Hannibal found most of the wine passable. The food, well, he could see a few decent steaks to be made by some of the guests. What they served was more fitting of dog food than for his own palette.

Each omega was introduced, led by a family member to the room, or someone of notable significance.

Hannibal lost interest quickly, there were some beauties among the mass. But nothing caught his attention, his opinions of them dropped further when some of them talked or openly flirted.

After two hours, and multiple omegas introducing themselves, he needed fresh air. Normally he would enjoy watching people fall over themselves to come to him, to try and please. Watching the omegas try to destroy each other to paint themselves in a better light became quite dull.

There was no beauty or elegance in the Bitchness they threw at each other, vying for his hand.

Stepping out onto the balcony, the scent of cigarette smoke at least dulled omega hormones, and that of excited alphas. The night sky was clear, stars visible and a crescent moon illuminating the water around the country club. The rustling in the bushes to the side though caught his attention.

The predator within purred as he moved, heading to where he'd seen dark curls. When he caught Will there, watching the omegas inside, he wasn't surprised.

"Will, I didn't expect to find you here."

Will leaped in the air, spinning so fast he almost fell before Hannibal caught him.

"If you're not careful, people might believe you were spying upon the guests of the ball," Hannibal spoke darkly.

"I… I was just-"

"Curious?" Hannibal finished for him, watching those blue eyes search frantically for a hint of anger or disappointment. Instead, they only found amusement, it seemed to make Will relax a fraction.

"Yeah."

“Would you be interested in joining me, inside?” Hannibal offered, hand open for Will to take.

For a moment Will looked at him like it was a cruel joke, before beginning to realize that Hannibal was completely serious. Then he bit his lip, desire in his eyes to say yes. “I shouldn’t.”

“But you want to.” Hannibal couldn’t help but take Will’s hand, holding it in his own as he pulled Will from the window and into the moonlight.

“And I shouldn’t, I don’t belong in there,” Will whispered, taking his hand back and holding it, like he had treasured Hannibal’s touch. “They're not for people like me.”

“It is in fact exactly for omegas like you.” Hannibal tilted his head a little. “Though you would need to change before stepping inside.”

It wasn’t that Hannibal didn’t appreciate the shifts and singlet Will wore, showing off his body, but for a black tie event, it was hardly adequate.

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Will fidgeted as he stepped out of the bathroom, Hannibal hummed in appreciation as Will looked at himself in the mirror wearing Hannibal’s shirt and jacket.

The sports coat had been slightly too small for Hannibal, on Will it looked too big, but he looked quite pleasing. The pants were slightly baggy, but it would be enough to allow Will into the ball.

That and every alpha that would pass by Will would pick up on Hannibal’s scent.

“You sure I look okay?”

“Adequate, if there had been time I would have bought something for you.” Hannibal came slower as he adjusted the collar of the shirt and then combed back Will’s curls. “Perfect.”

Will looked again, worry in his face before he seemed to glance back to Hannibal. When his shoulders squared and he held himself up higher, Hannibal wanted to move forward, to tilt Will’s chin out a little and tell him how well he was doing.

“Okay,” Will said softly.

As Will stepped forward, Hannibal controlled his urges, instead holding an elbow out for Will to take. Like the gentleman he was.

Will did, holding on as they walked back towards the ball. As Will caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, Hannibal saw the awe in his eyes.

“You look ravishing, darling,” Hannibal spoke, delighting how quickly Will turned his head. The red flush in his cheeks and going to his ears.

“Guess there’s a first time for everything.” Will smiled awkwardly.

“If I had the opportunity to court you, I would make it a daily occurrence at the least,” Hannibal smirked, already thinking of ways he could spoil Will.

“Including calling me darling every day?” Will grinned.

“Wicked thing.” Hannibal wanted to ravish Will then and there, already knowing he found the perfect mate to take home. Charming and witty, an omega who wanted to challenge the world, never taking no for an answer.

When they walked into the ball, Will stepped closer to Hannibal, allowing him to guide him. And Hannibal did, taking him past a table that was already staring at them, over to a small table in the corner where he pulled out the chair for Will and then sat next to him.

Hannibal couldn't help but watch Will, whose blue eyes widened with awe as he watched other omegas dance with potential mates.

"You didn't simply come here to be invited in." Hannibal watched blue eyes turn to him, sharpen before the awe fell and Will gave a shy smile.

"No," Will admitted. "To be honest, I don't truly care for these things, the show of wealth between them."

Hannibal chuckled. "I don't doubt they treated you poorly during your stay here, and when you worked on their boats."

"Better than some of the other places I have been." Will looked back out to the floor, watching others dance. "Growing up poor, searching through trash to find dinner, you can't help but have some jealousy for those who have had it easy."

"That is not the only reason you came."

Will swallowed, a shaker breath before he looked down sheepishly. "Normally when I talk to people about what I want to do, they scorn me."

"Because of your desire to enter the police force?"

"Because of my desire to not simply accept settling down and fawning over an alpha, there is more to life than simply having children." Will's words were filled with anger.

It was understandable, given what the South normally desired of their alphas and omegas. To start families, to produce more, all while the alpha went out, held a job, and became successful. The omega partner was destined to stay home, normally pregnant while taking care of the other children.

No doubt, the people who tried to preach said words to Will were the same that told Hannibal he needed to mate and start a family. Will's lack of desire to start a family right now appealed even more to him, nothing to tie him down, nothing concrete.

"I've heard you were quite opinionated." Hannibal regarded Will again, admiring even more.

The words, however, seemed to have the opposite effect of what Hannibal was hoping for, with Will suddenly standing as he shook his head.

"This was a bad idea."

"To come here?" Hannibal canted his head, curious.

"To think you were not like the other alphas. That you actually listened and understood that I wanted my own life." Will spoke fast, anger rising.

"They label you as being opinionated because in truth, you desire more for yourself. They feel threatened that you wish to accomplish something and challenge their beliefs." Hannibal says because that was the truth. As well as being threatened by Will's beauty. The easy thing to do was tear him down socially, make him less desirable, and label him as an outcast.

It made Will pause, eyes searching Hannibal's expression, yet seeming to find nothing. "Theme, if you knew of this before, why did you invite me?"

"I find you interesting," Hannibal answered honestly, standing himself as he held out his hand. "When I saw you outside, I saw no reason that you should not be allowed to come and enjoy the festivities. This evening has been far more fascinating since your arrival."

For a moment, Will seemed as though he wanted to run. Yet, something made him reach forward and take Hannibal's hand.

When Will allowed Hannibal to lead him, Hannibal felt something within in him twist around his ribs, the ice around his heart melting, an ache to it being soothed by Will's warmth in the palm of his hand.

Pulling Will close on the dance floor, Hannibal watched as Will looked up, how his mouth opened slightly and pupils dilated as Hannibal pulled him closer and into a walking position to dance.

Hannibal guided Will's hand to his right shoulder before he let his own slip down to cup the curve of Will's spine. A desire to go down to feel Will against him, but with so many around it would be improper.

When Will tried to match his first steps, he stumbled, Hannibal felt his lips twitch in endearment. "Stand on my feet."

"I'll hurt you."

"Do you wish to dance?" Hannibal asked.

Will gave a nod, and Hannibal smiled a little wider. "Then allow me to carry some of the weight off your shoulders."

"You're ridiculous," Will spoke quietly as he moved to stand on Hannibal's feet.

"And there is plenty of time to learn to dance later, but for now," Hannibal spoke before moving to waltz with Will.

The weight of Will on his toes was not overly heavy, Hannibal tolerated the pain for the delight that shone in Will's eyes. After a few passes, Will took a tentative step off and picked up the waltz easily.

Slower, and slightly clumsy, but a few minutes later he was smooth, easily stepping up the pace and smiling wider.

As they passed a table near the edge, Will froze when he heard his name.

"Will Graham? How did you get in here?!"

"I invited him," Hannibal said easily, turning to face the woman, watching her eyes go a little wide in shock.

"This is an invitation-only event!" She rose from her seat, squaring her shoulders.

"Certainly." Hannibal drew himself up straight, looking her straight in the eyes. "Which is why I purchased them. Is there an issue with who I decide to dance with?"

"I should just go." Will began to pull himself away, though Hannibal looked at him, eyes soft as he silently asked him to stay.

"Will is dressed appropriately, and I have the tickets with me if you wish to see them." Hannibal reached into his breast pocket.

"Invitation or not, we have standards here." She spoke scornfully.

Before Hannibal had the chance to respond, Will muttered something under his breath and ran.

Hannibal desired to go after him, but his attention was drawn back to the woman that had stormed over.

“Your invitation thank you.” Her hand was held out, demanding as she held her chin up, as though she was superior. Though Hannibal saw the jealousy in her eyes, the pride that swelled in her chest from making Will run.

Still, he placed his invitation into her hand, watching her read it before her face fell, and she cleared her throat. “You’re Hannibal Lecter?!”

“Is there an issue?” Hannibal knew there wasn’t, he had been generous in his donation to the ball, and it seemed to be making the woman backtrack.

“I…” she cleared her throat. “My apologies, I did not realize you had bought several tickets, um, if Will wishes to return-“

“Unfortunately, it seems the moment has passed us by.” Hannibal finished for her.

“I didn’t realize you had bought him a ticket, I didn’t see his name in the list when I created it.”

“Must have slipped your mind.” Hannibal gave her the feeble excuse, watching her clutch to it.

“Yes, unfortunately as secretary it can be a long list.”

Hannibal knew her name then, Marion Shears. Her ruthless demeanor was evident, certainly living up to what others had gossiped about. “If you excuse me, I have other matters to attend to now.”

Marion turned red in the face, slinking back to her chair. The others next to her then started to chat, no doubt about what had just happened, about Will being there and Hannibal dancing with him.

As Hannibal went outside, he tried to spot where Will may have gone. Though he followed his scent, he lost it only a few feet past the docks.

It felt like a fairytale to lose Will, an excuse to look for him to retrieve his clothing.

As Hannibal returned to his room, he knew he still had Bill's number. It would be easy to call and pick up his clothing, but what he wanted to ask now was far more important.

Hannibal wanted Will as his mate.

If he was to choose anyone in such circumstances that were upon him, at least Will was interesting. He didn't simply bend to what Hannibal desired, he spoke openly and unclouded by others' judgment. He spoke from the heart and had an appetite for knowledge that Hannibal wanted to nurture.

He could already picture having long discussions with the omega, desiring to have him in his bed underneath him keening. Body tense on the edge of orgasm before relief would come from the intense pleasure.

How Hannibal could wake to those blue eyes simply looking upon him. Delight in seeing Will curled up on the sofa reading from Hannibal's own private collection of books. He wondered if Will would delight in the variety.

The piece of paper came out from Hannibal's wallet, laid on the edge of the bedside table as Hannibal memorized it.

First thing in the morning, he would find out as much as he could about Bill Graham. Seek the weak link in his anchor that would allow him to unmoor his omega son into Hannibal's

hands.

Chapter 2

The knock on the hotel room door made Hannibal pause.

A delicate inhale that left an unpleasant smell in the back of his mouth. Still, he opened the door.

“Marion, this is a surprise,” Hannibal spoke as he looked down at the omega woman. Noticing the way she tilted her neck, the attempt to instinctively soothe and appeal to his alpha nature.

“I heard that you were staying close by,” Marion spoke as she rang her hands. “We were heading to La Castello for drinks if you would like to join us. It’s mainly the committee and sponsors.”

For a moment, Hannibal considered slamming the door shut on her. Another idea of stringing her together to roast, like a suckling pig. “I’d be delighted.”

Marion smiled. “Wonderful.”

Hannibal watched her walk away, the confidence returning to her step, the way she elevated her chin as though she was above all.

Will was far prettier than her, his scent far more appealing. But to have Will as his mate, he needed to know more about his father. What it would take.

Sliding back into his tux, doing up the buttons as he perfected his mask in the mirror. Hannibal stepped into the role of guest and left to gain the information he needed from those who would be happy to inform him of all the gossip of Will and Bill Graham.

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It turned out to be favorable for him. Hannibal already knew Marion was on the committee for the country club as the secretary, but it turned out she knew where they had come from, and knew valuable information about Will's father.

"He's racked up quite the debt with the wrong people," Marion spoke quietly to Hannibal while another omega woman nodded and tilted her head to hear the conversation.

"That man attracts the wrong type of people." Marion tsked. "Had some rough alpha at the club bar the other day asking where Bill way."

Hannibal watched Marion chuckle with the other women as he waited, curious to know why someone was looking for him. Or to what debt was owed that it would cause people to search Bill Graham out.

"As if we would let Bill into the club bar, I pointed him in the right direction. I've heard he tends to drink at the one on the end of the main street." Marion spoke with her nose in the air, as though the place was far beneath her when Hannibal considered just how well she could fit in.

"I assured them that he'd never be allowed inside our establishment. That he only worked on the boats and yachts. We can't have riff-raff seen inside." Marion sipped on her drink. "He went back downtown. Our reputation would decline if we simply started to let any stray inside."

Another woman leaned forward, touching Hannibal's wrist as she vied for his attention. "Though you did quite a spectacular job grooming that boy, it took me a while to actually know it was him."

Hannibal kept his lips pursed at the backhanded compliment. "It's a shame your club does not have access to a tailor. Most of the hotels and clubs I attend normally have one on hand for alterations before events."

“Our tailor had an emergency at the last minute,” Marion spoke, but both of them knew it was a lie. There was no number on the itinerary when it came.

No tailor at his hotel despite it being five stars.

“Next time we’ll have a standby ready. Lesson learned.” Marion shrugged.

Hannibal brought the glass of wine to his nose, scenting the contents as he thought of what Will would look like dressed in a proper fitting suit. A shirt with the top button undone to reveal a blue leather collar with Hannibal’s initials upon it to show his ownership of such a stunning omega.

“Next time.” Hannibal agreed, knowing he would never bother to bring Will back when they were mated. He would instead take him out to the opera or private parties where his beauty and intelligence could be truly appreciated.

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“Bout bloody time boy!”

Will felt the words like a physical blow as he looked up to his father who was on the boat and waiting for him.

He hadn’t been home yet, instead hiding out in one of the sheds as he hid Hannibal’s clothing. Scenting it as he had slept with it. Knowing if his father saw the clothes too many questions would be raised.

It would likely result in him being dragged by the ear to their little boat as his father skipped town again. Heading down river to start fresh in a new place, only to do the same in several months.

“Slept in.” Will lied, feeling the knowing look from his father.

“What were you out doing last night anyway? I didn’t see anything new in the fridge?” Bill asked.

For a moment, Will wanted to say he’d been into the country club, to tell his father that the wealthy sobs who often looked down upon them didn’t even recognize him when he was dressed appropriately. But he knew it wouldn’t please him. No doubt, his father already knew he hadn’t slept in the house. It was luck that Bill was a beta and unable to detect Hannibal’s scent that clung to his skin. The strong notes of sandalwood were making Will’s skin tingle.

Will gave a noncommittal shrug. “Tried to get a couple of eggs, but Mr Jackson got out his shotgun, hightailed out of there, and hid until he went back inside. Just took a while.”

Bill chuckled. “Be easier to just bring the chicken home. Did you find anything else to eat?”

“No, sorry.” Will ducked his head as he hurried over to start working on the boat motor. Not wanting to continue the conversation further.

Behind him, he heard his father huff a breath, then the telltale click of a lighter.

Cigarette smoke wafted over Will as he worked, grease under his nails and Hannibal’s sandalwood dissipating, in its stead a feeling of morose growing.

It was easy to lose himself in the task. His fingers became coated in grease, creeping under his fingernails. Will deliberately avoided wiping them upon himself, he didn’t want to lose Hannibal’s scent entirely to the thick grease. He wanted to cherish the memory of the night while he could, knowing nothing would truly eventuate from it.

Perhaps it had been a cruel joke to dress him up and take him, a bet to see if he could pass in high society.

Will knew he could never fit into that world, or Hannibal's. But he could dream about it, waking in the morning and not having to go out and seek food to put on the table. To have someone look at him with appreciation and not scold him for having ideas or wanting to make something of himself.

As a shadow cast over him, Will looked up. Meeting one of the men he'd seen hanging around the country club the day before. One of the men that Bill usually did business with.

A cigar hung in the alpha's mouth, teeth bared as he deliberately inhaled Will's scent and cocked his head casually. Calculating something as Will looked away.

Tony was well known at the docks and bars.

While his father always told him to keep his nose out of their business, Will knew that a debt was owed.

Many times they'd skipped town before having to pay up, but now word may have reached Tony's ears and he had come to collect.

"Well, well, well…" Tony spoke, looking at Bill. "You didn't tell me you had an omega son?"

"He's not." Bill gruffed.

Tony bent in closer as he took a more deliberate sniff, hand coming out to tilt Will's chin up to look at him.

Will looked away, feeling his lip twitch in a desire to growl. He was tensed, knowing the alpha could smell Hannibal on him. The notes he could detect because of his alpha nature, the ones his own father could not.

“An omega that is being courted.” Tony blew smoke into Will’s face, making him cough.

Will looked over to his father, feeling like he was a worm on a hook. The alpha wanted him to wiggle to lure his father in, but Will stayed still and silent, a look of apology as he met sapphire blue eyes.

“I’m not being courted,” Will spoke calmly as he went back to working on the motor.

“Now, I heard you attended the debutante ball last night with an alpha. Sounds like courting to me. Or some form of money that your father could pay his bills with.” Tony smoothly replied.

Shoulders tensed as Will looked to his father, meeting his eyes. He’d always been told to stay away from alphas, especially those at the club. Will knew it came from past experience with his mother, even though Bill never said it. Will could read the pain in his eyes.

“You believe my William would be invited into something as expensive and elite as that.” Bill laughed.

Will knew it was fake, put on. But he said nothing as Tony relaxed against a railing on the dock.

“Now I have it on good authority that he was there, with an alpha. A doctor.” Tony let his eyes roam over Will, something sinister lurking within brown eyes, sharp teeth barely visible.

It wasn’t the first time that Will had been threatened because of his father, part of him knew he owed this alpha money. For a brief moment, Will hated that his father drowned his sorrows in booze and tried to get on his feet by gambling. Anything for a quick buck.

It was the main reason they moved so much. Bill would run up a debt, and if he couldn't get the money together quickly enough, they would skip town. Or because people noticed Will's status.

Then the same threat would roll in.

"Might be time to consider the benefits of selling your omega, Bill." Tony looked at his watch. "You've got 24 hours to either bring me the money, or I come to collect. Either way, I will be collecting."

Then he gave a nod. "Bill. William, I'll be sure to have someone watching you." The piece on the alpha's side though, sitting in a worn belt could be easily taken out and used. No doubt a shot to his leg to immobilize him. Tony's hand rested on the gun, a warning.

"You expect me to come up with everything in such a short amount of time?" Bill scoffed.

"From what I've heard, the alpha that has taken an interest in your omega is quite well off." Tony gave a smirk to Will. "Your omega might be better off with him than being dragged around by you."

There was a moment Will wanted to kick himself, furious that the people at the ball had talked about him, likely laughing because he was there. He could hear them whispering about how he'd tried to fit in, the laughter that he thought himself worthy of being courted, or to be in their ball.

As Tony walked away, Will heard his father's footsteps approach, internally scolding himself for being hopeful when he had met Hannibal.

Part of him hoped that perhaps his father might actually let him go as Tony had suggested.

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“I can’t believe how stupid you are!” Bill shouted, fisted punching the wall as Will shrank in on himself.

“You know that you’re meant to take your suppressants so people don’t find out!”

Will swallowed hard. “I didn’t have the money-“

“You could afford to feed that fucking dog!” Bill yelled.

Will stayed silent, biting onto his bottom lip as he calculated how likely his father was to hit him. Mark him, make him look worthless like he had when he was 14 years old when they’d skipped town because he had his first heat and drawn the unwanted attention of alphas.

He’d been beaten and bruised, a collar around his neck to make him look taken when his father had finally dragged him down to the boat yard and skipped town.

Will had been dumped at an abandoned house on the river, left to suffer alone before Bill had come back with fresh clothes and suppressants two days later.

“I can go into town and steal some,” Will spoke quietly.

“No.” Bill shook his head. “Even I can smell you now, just… Just go to your room, Christ!”

-

The bar was gloomy inside, cigarette smoke hung in the air. It was strong enough to almost block Hannibal’s sense of smell.

Almost.

As he ordered a wine, a Sauvignon Blanc, light and refreshing like Will. Sipping it as he watched the door.

Hannibal saw Bill walk in, the way he froze in the doorway and stared at him. How his hand curled into a fist before he looked to a table at the rear.

Hannibal gave a nod and walked over while feeling eyes on him. No doubt discussion as to what he was doing here, despite being in a more casual style, he was far better dressed than the rest. Clean and showered, no signs of working as a laborer like the rest of the crowd.

Sitting down, one leg croissant over the other as Hannibal watched Bill. Seeing the emotions play out on his face, the desire to storm out, the way he stood tall, like he could take him on if he was challenged. It was admirable but unwarranted.

Hannibal had no desire to kill Bill. That and doing so would reflect poorly on him with Will undoubtedly.

Finally, Bill joined him at the table, sitting heavily as he met Hannibal's eyes and determination to not look away from the challenge.

"Good afternoon, Bill." Hannibal was as polite and cordial when he had organized their meeting over the phone.

"Hardly how I'd describe the situation." Bill gruffed as he leaned forward, eyes narrowed and teeth baring in a display of dominance. "My boy came home this morning reeking of you."

Hannibal tasted the wine, the fruity notes that would go well with cinnamon. "Nothing untoward happened, I can assure you."

“No,” Bill searched him, finding something within Hannibal’s expression that made him look past the mask of pleasantries. “You’re not that type…. But your interest didn’t escape notice.”

“Jealousy has a way of making tongues wag.” Hannibal smiled, baring teeth. “I’ve heard many rumors and stories about your travels.”

“Yet you still arranged to meet.” Bill looked confused for a second before something made him bow his head a fraction. The color began to drain from his face.

“Because you have what I desire, and I have a way to make your life far easier,” Hannibal spoke calmly, wondering what Bill had seen, if this was where Will had developed his own keen awareness of people. His empathy disorder.

“You’re certainly doing the opposite currently,” Bill leaned back. “We’re leaving Louisiana this afternoon. I don’t care what you have to offer. From someone like you, it’d be like making a deal with the devil.”

“That would be true if you had a soul left to sell.” Hannibal swirled his glass as he contemplated. “Though I understand you have quite the debt. It can not be helped that my interest in Will was noticed, that people talk, and given the South still accepts dowries.” Hannibal paused, watching Bill take in exactly what he was saying. “If you do run, do you believe you would be fast enough to avoid those who seek you? Those who have threatened Will with far worse than what I can offer?”

Silence met Hannibal, a man before him who weighed his options carefully.

Hannibal let Bill think for a minute before he took an envelope out and slid it across. “A fair price.”

Bill watched the envelope, though he didn’t touch it as he looked back to Hannibal’s expression instead. Searching his eyes. “From what I know, you could have any other omega at that ball. Why do you want my Will?”

Hannibal's gaze dipped for a fraction of a second. Then met Bill again. "He has ambitions, a desire for knowledge I admire. I wish to nurture it."

It was true, and Bill seemed to pick up on it. Instead of responding, he took the envelope and opened it. Seeing the cheque first. Silently counting the zeros and then the cash.

Hannibal knew it was a fair price, a generous price. With cash to allow Bill to pay off his debts and money for his future. But it would come at a cost.

As the envelope closed, being tucked into Bill's jacket pocket, Hannibal felt victorious in knowing that Will was his.

"You placed a target on my back," Bill spoke quietly. "An ultimatum of either accepting your offer and losing my son to you or losing him to the sharks who'd sell him to people that are just as bad as you."

"I'm far worse than what you believe me to be." Hannibal mused.

"I look at you and see the stillness in the dark ocean waters," Bill spoke quietly, meeting his eyes. "The quiet before the storm, the Hunter that lurks in the shadows and waits for the perfect moment to strike. I've heard fishermen describe it when they go out to open waters and everything stills, one moment their safe in their boat, the next their in the water being pulled to the depths as their ship sinks from being crushed."

"You may not be the Kraken, Dr Lecter. But there is something monstrous about you that lurks behind the elegant and pompous appearance you peacock to everyone. They may simply think it's part of your alpha nature. But it's not that. There's something missing. And I hope that you don't consume Will with whatever dark hunger lies within you."

Hannibal felt the weight of Bill's words, the protective nature of a father wanting the best for his only son. His omega son whom he could never fully understand or protect as much as he wanted to.

“I didn’t simply choose Will because he was easy, or due to your debts. There is something about him that intrigues me.”

“And that terrifies me more,” Bill spoke. “You flaunted your wealth and took him to that ball and made him the center of attention. If you hurt him, I’m anyway. I promise I’ll kill you myself.”

Hannibal smirked. “If you tried to take him from me I’d have no problem cutting your heart from your chest and feeding strips of it to him. Along with any other that tried to take Will from me.”

Bill didn’t flinch, an understanding that Hannibal could and would do what he was promising. Instead, he held out his hand.

“You don't offer a man this much without conditions,” Bill spoke, looking at the hand.

“Indeed.” Hannibal tilted his head. “I’ll permit Will to speak to you, see you. But only on his terms. You’re not to contact him anymore, except post-humously of course.”

“When I’m already in my grave.” Bill spat.

“Perhaps with this, you may develop something for him to inherit,” Hannibal spoke with amusement, highly doubtful.

Hannibal watched Bill consider, knowing the envelope was already in his pocket. Now that he had seen the sum, it would be much more difficult to part with, given Bill’s need for money and greed.

When Bill finally shook his hand, Hannibal stood, wine glass half full on the table as he straightened his tie.

“I expect Will to be dropped off at the hotel with his belongings in an hour, I will be waiting.” Hannibal began to walk towards the door before he paused. “Tony already knows where Will is, if you decide to run, it will be much more painful for you. He knows not to touch a hair on your son’s head, but I have no need for you.”

Chapter 3

Traditionally, collars were a sign of ownership. A claim to the omega who wore them, given by an alpha who had mated with them or intended to during their next heat.

Hannibal had met many omegas who were happy to wear a collar, or be bare and display their mating claim. In Baltimore, many omegas had the choice to decide. In the South, it was tradition. Omegas had as much freedom as a young child. They were not able to make their own decisions unless the alpha or parent verbally approved it or signed off on it. They were not able to own property or even their own bank account. Valuables were never in their name, even if the omega came from a wealthy family, inheriting the entire estate. It would always have to go to the alpha of the omega. Or placed into a trust until the omega was mated.

Hannibal watched as an omega from the ball admired her own new collar in the reflection of a store window, the alpha next to him seemed giddy with what was no doubt his purchase.

The omega's fingers ran over the pearls, the string of white pearls that seemed to be customary in the area. A sign of wealth and influence.

Pearls that were store-bought, to yellow later in time.

Hannibal could tell the difference from the shine upon them, the way each pearl was the exact same size. The alpha had worn a rented tux during the ball, making a few small adjustments to ensure it looked tailored. The multiple scents Hannibal had detected upon it that night had not fooled him one inch. Unlike others at the party.

Turning back to the window of the jeweler, Hannibal looked further in, past the accustomed pearls, and wondered if there was something better suited to Will’s skin.

Entering, the bell tinkled, but no one came. He walked in, past the usual displays, and to the back, pausing to look at the black pearls on display for a moment. A memory of his mother looking in the mirror as she wore her own.

He remembered his mother's own collection of pearls, how Mischa had loved to hold them. They were a gift from his father, not when they had mated, but much after. Another collar for her collection, collars she only wore for special occasions. Many had been left behind in haste and later stolen during the war.

Mischa had always adored them, told off more times than Hannibal could keep count of at a young age. Hannibal would always cherish the memory of Mischa's smile when she wore them. The tears that fell down his cheeks when he'd buried her favorite set with her bones in the copper pot.

Stopping the diamond collars, Hannibal walked past the first, towards the emeralds on display. The green would look stunning on Will's skin, but the sapphires held the same color of Will's eyes in the morning light.

"May I help you sir?"

"What other sapphire collars do you have?" Hannibal looked to the beta.

"Most of our clients adore our blue pearls." The beta man headed over to a different area. Trying to spark Hannibal's interest.

Hannibal gave a tight smile, knowing the man was trying to likely sell him a false set of pearls as he had done with many other clients. "I believe my omega would look stunning in a sapphire collar, to bring out his blue eyes."

Some might say he could have held superstitions regarding placing pearls upon Will's own neck. Hannibal knew he didn't want to invoke memories he'd longed to keep in the vault of his mind palace.

A few selections were shown, and Hannibal weighed each against the image of Will. What was too dark, too light, until a teardrop sapphire caught his eyes.

It was in a less traditional choker. Fitted with white gold to enhance the blue. The collar was adjustable, able to sit around the base of Will's neck, or to be placed around it with the chain dropping down.

Hannibal could already imagine Will in the bed, presenting as he took hold of the extra length of chain to pull him up. To kiss his temple before he'd bury himself into his beautiful mate.

Originally, Hannibal did not have any intention to collar his new mate when he made arrangements to participate in the ball.

Then he'd met Will. Beautiful blue eyes and porcelain skin, chocolate curls that would highlight the flush in his cheeks when Will was nervous or particularly enjoyed Hannibal's actions or words.

"This one, placed into one of your velvet boxes please with a matching lapel." Hannibal took out his credit card, placing it on the counter as he considered if there was anything else that took his fancy.

The selection in the shop though was small, compared to Baltimore. He knew when he'd arrive home he'd be having collars made for Will. Along with clothing and suits for the opera and other engagements, they would attend. A collar that matched each, along with something that would be for the bedroom only.

Leaving the store with the bag, Hannibal smiled to himself as he wondered how Bill would tell his son. How Will would react?

Given the blush that had been upon the omega's cheeks each time they met, he doubted Will would be greatly upset at the situation. That and Hannibal intended to keep his word about allowing Will into the force.

Giving Will some freedoms would build trust and distance.

It offered Hannibal time to continue with his studies, then allowing him back into his artistic career he'd had to put on hold for a while due to his work commitments. Will would have what he desired, freedom and an alpha that did not control him, and Hannibal would have his residency status. No more interference from Inspector Pazzi.

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Will stood awkwardly in the hotel lobby, his clothes sticking to his skin as he adjusted the shirt his father had thrown at him. He knew he reeked of pheromones, his heat becoming one step closer.

It felt like all eyes were on him, other omegas sneering, alphas turning their nose up like he didn't deserve to be in the hotel. Let alone be claimed.

Fingers went to the old worn collar. A simple plain leather that itched against his skin as Will tugged at it. He remembered the first time his father had thrown it at him and made him wear it during his first heat. Bought from the store, suited more for a dog than a human. But his father didn't care, it was cheap. A way to hide what Will was until it could benefit him.

"Quit touching it." Bill hissed.

Will glared at his father. A desire to hiss at him that it was his fault in the first place. But it would only make their current situation more uncomfortable.

In truth, Will couldn't wait to get away. A hope Hannibal was earnest when he spoke of allowing him to join the force, or at least give him some freedoms. It was obvious he'd been sold, the only comfort was that it would have to be Hannibal who bought him. But then part of Will questioned why a wealthy alpha, a doctor, who wasn't a traditionalist was buying an omega.

"You could have bought something that was nicer." Will eventually replied. Knowing his father had money now, he'd seen it in his pocket. There was already a new pack of cigarettes.

“I’m sure he’s got one for you already, seems like a traditionalist to me.” Bill gruffed.

Will bowed his head as the statement made his stomach drop, arousal growing at the idea of Hannibal touching his neck, fingers digging into the nape of his neck, and going down on his knees.

A woman tutting him made his face burn, no doubt able to smell him. Will kept his head down as he sniffed the air, waiting for the delicate notes of sandalwood that always seemed to be the first notes he’d detect of Hannibal. Ignoring the way he was beginning to feel empty.

Part of him though still wondered why Hannibal had bought him. Why he couldn’t find a suitor in Baltimore? Surely there were omegas that would be a better fit, who were happy to stay home, happy to give up their freedom to please their alpha. To have children with.

The thoughts paused as the elevator doors opened and Hannibal walked out with a bellboy pushing the alpha’s luggage. Their eyes met, and Will felt something different. Noticing the way Hannibal’s lips curved up a fraction more than they did with others when he’d been with him before.

Genuine affection.

Not loathing, pity, or annoyance. Not what Will was accustomed to seeing every time he’d meet people’s eyes.

The same look he’d given Will when they first met when he’d dressed him to include him in the ball.

It made Will stand a little taller, lift his chin a little higher.

Another omega from the ball walked past, her eyes darting from Will to Hannibal with a look of shock.

Will held Hannibal's gaze though. Only breaking it when the alpha was a meter away.

"Good evening, Will." Hannibal purred.

The words washed over him, making his stomach twist and butterflies erupt as Will bowed his head a fraction before looking up through his lashes. Then, ever so slightly baring his neck for the alpha.

Will didn't miss the way Hannibal's tongue darted out a fraction to lick lips, how his nostrils flared. The alpha's gaze became heavier, more delighted as his lips curved up and eyes crinkled.

"Good evening, Dr Lecter."

Bill gruffed. "As you wanted."

"Thank you." Hannibal broke the contact with Will to acknowledge his father.

The distasteful glance at the collar made Will want too keen, to apologize, that it was not his idea.

"Would you please allow me to replace this, Will?" A gentle motion towards the collar.

Will watched Hannibal eye the collar on his neck, a promise of something more meaningful to replace the worn-out dog collar his father had forced upon him.

“Please,” Will replied softly, baring his neck more.

Hannibal took a box out from a suitcase, the bellboy quickly zipping the case up again.

Eyes fell to the dark blue box, the name of the jeweler stamped upon the top. A local store Will knew of, collars he’d spied in the window when he had walked past. Collars he’d seen wore by many other wealthy omegas.

Always pearls that had been worn, different shapes and sizes. Harvested by locals and sold for a pittance. Many of the omegas who wore them held themselves in such high regard.

When Hannibal opened the box though, the first thing Will noted was the absence of pearls. Instead, his eyes landed on the blue sapphire, the white gold chain that could be adjusted.

Will raised his hands to undo his own collar.

“May I?” Hannibal interrupted his motions, a faint smirk as their fingers touched.

Will felt his mouth go dry, biting onto his bottom lip as he nodded.

Hannibal’s fingers were warm as they brushed against Will’s neck, delicately undoing the collar and pulling it away as it brushed Will’s skin. Hannibal lets fingers brush over the red mark on Will’s neck, disapproving of the mark. Will glanced up, swearing he saw something flash in Hannibal’s eyes. Desire, hunger, possessive motions to claim.

When Hannibal touched the back of his neck though, Will felt his mind go blank. His ears ringing softly as he tried to stay standing when Hannibal applied some pressure applying the new collar. Then fingers coming to lift his chin, eyes meeting.

Will stood tall, proud to wear the collar, looking to his side to see his father avoiding eye contact. He wanted Bill to see though, that he was worth more than the value his father had

placed upon him.

Hannibal leaned in, lips brushing the shell of Will's ear. "Perfect."

A shiver ran down Will's back, pleasure making his cheeks heat as he gave a gentle purr of satisfaction. He touched the collar, unable to stop himself.

"Thank you."

"Think of this as the first of many gifts, if you would allow me to," Hannibal spoke fondly.

Bill shuffled awkwardly, unappreciative of what Hannibal was doing.

It made Will smile a fraction, looking down. "I look forward to it."

-

Will felt different, standing out the front next to Hannibal, feeling the alpha's hand on his lower back as they waited for the valet to bring his car around.

The Bentley pulled up, Hannibal already moving forward to open the door of the passenger side for Will.

"Continental S." Will hummed in appreciation, sliding into the passenger seat. Looking at the interior with appreciation as he felt the engine purr.

He'd read about the car, seen pictures in magazines. Knew the torque, already wanting to take a peak under the hood to see the engine.

Instead, he looked back to the entrance of the hotel as Hannibal was tipping the valet. Watching his father stand there, hands in his pockets. No doubt clutching the money Hannibal gave him. Along with the cigarette in his mouth.

“You didn’t share your address with him.” Will spoke as Hannibal went to get in the car.

“It seemed counterproductive,” Hannibal admitted. “Besides, it was not my information to share.”

Will understood what Hannibal meant, that he could share the information with his father if he wanted to.

“Give me a minute,” Will said, seeing Hannibal incline his head a fraction.

Leaving the car, Will felt the weight of Hannibal’s collar, the eyes of other alphas and omegas upon him as he walked up to his father.

“Don’t blow it all at once,” Will said quietly. “Buy that house you always talked about.”

“Was thinking about moving back to the swamps.” Bill gruffed as his hand clenched around the box of cigarettes in his pocket. “I didn’t mean to-“

“Don’t.” Will closed his eyes, avoiding the feelings of pity and regret his father wanted to show. “I’m just glad it happened now instead of being forced upon me.”

“I always tried to give you a choice.”

Will bit his lip before answering swiftly. “You don’t remember the times when you were drunk, stumbling home in the dark. How you told me it was easier to keep me around

because people felt pity for you being a single parent. How you told me that I was the biggest mistake."

Will watched his father shrink back. But Will remembers the ferocity of his father's words when they were spoken, the malignant nature of them. Each one spat with honest truth from a drunk coward, fear of growing close to his only son. Anger to find that his son was an omega like his mother.

"You don't remember when you told me that you wished I'd present as an alpha because then I could finally be useful."

Standing there, Will could hear the rumble of the Bentley, smell the acidic tang of regret in the air as he looked his father in the eyes and drank in his regret and sorrow. But most importantly, the belief that Will was different. Bill had never put a finger on what was wrong with Will, but it had certainly found a way to be shown in other avenues of life.

"I can't stop you from contacting me, but I have a choice now if I actually want you to be part of my life now." Will said in a low voice. "I'll contact you when I'm ready."

Will turned around, walking back to the car. Almost able to hear how he shattered his father's hold on him. There was relief as he slid back into the passenger's seat.

Hannibal drove, silent as music played over the radio. A classical tune that seemed to fit the turmoil of emotions he was going through.

Will had been silent, not knowing what to say before he finally plucked the courage.

"You meant it when you said I could join the force?" Will looked straight ahead.

"I may be many things, Will." Hannibal smiled, changing gear and pulling away from the hotel. "But I always keep my promises."

“I’d really like to do that when we get to Baltimore,” Will said. “I don’t doubt that you needed a bond to stay in America, but I can’t deny the opportunity to have a fresh start and an actual future I can build.”

“You felt as though you had struck a kindred spirit?” Hannibal murmured.

“You don’t look at me the same way you look at others, you smile more with your eyes than your lips. You enjoy coming close and wanting to touch when you normally avoid and stick to etiquette.” Will hummed. “And I like that I bring something out in you that surprises you, and even me. But you're not offended by it, you're curious.”

“I find you interesting,” Hannibal admits.

Will smiled a little wider as he looked down at his hands, wanting to lean over and touch Hannibal’s. But he waited, he didn’t know what to do, how to initiate the contact.

-

Will shifted awkwardly in his seat, feeling sweat drip down his back as his heat began to set in. He’d said what he needed to, now he wanted to feel how Hannibal would worship him.

As they had driven, there was an ache to his body, a hollowness. Every time he breathed in he could scent Hannibal’s alpha musk. Sandalwood and pine engulfed his senses, along with the scent of leather books. The type Will loved to read when he’d gone to the library, the scent that lingered on his fingers afterward.

It was intoxicating. It made him salivate. The desire to rip his clothes off and present sat in his throat, but he sat there. Sweating and slicking up his pants.

As the windows in the car rolled down, Will keened softly at the loss of Hannibal’s scent.

“I apologize.”

“Do I really smell that bad?” Will felt self-conscious as he turned away.

“Quite the opposite,” Hannibal remarked. Pulling the car over. “You are making it awfully difficult to concentrate.”

Hannibal turned the engine off. For a moment he closed his eyes to savour the scent. Notes of cinnamon, sweet verbena, and earth struck by sunlight.

Will radiated warmth from his heat, it melted the ice in Hannibal’s veins as he leaned over, looking into blue eyes before he gently kissed Will on the lips to taste.

“I’ve been waiting for you to do that,” Will whispered, melting into the contact as he reached over, entwining their fingers.

“I’ve desired to kiss you since the moment we met.” Hannibal hummed, stealing another long slow kiss. “But I prefer it here, away from prying eyes. Where we can be honest with each other.”

“No pretence of etiquette?” Will said slyly.

“Public displays of affection are normally frowned upon,” Hannibal spoke seriously while giving a sly smile.

“Can’t have your acquaintances see you unbecoming?” Will teased. Already thinking of how Hannibal could probably make him kneel if they went to another ball, how he’d sit at his alpha’s feet and eat food from his fingers.

“You already are aware I do not confine myself to the normal traditions,” Hannibal smirked. “But I have no qualms in satisfying your desires right now.”

“Even if people see us?”

“Let them,” Hannibal murmured, tilting Will’s chair back. “Let them know that you were the one who caught my eye.”

It sent a rush through Will, wanting to be taken and have people see him being claimed. A car drove past, making Will flush brighter as he ghrabbed Hannibal’s shirt and pulled him closer. “Alpha.”

Hannibal obliged, moving closer as he began to kiss Will roughly. Lips kissing the corners of Will's own before he tasted his omega. Hand slipping down to palm Will’s trousers, feeling the wetness of the slick already pooling.

A quick move had Hannibal on the back seat, pulling Will over with him as he tore at the shirt Will wore.

Pale porcelain was scratched easily, beautiful vibrant red marks drawn on Will’s back by Hannibal’s nails as he kissed the back of his neck and nipped. Enjoying the way Will made different expressions and mewls.

Will however rubbed himself against Hannibal’s pants, eager for more.

An awkward moment finally allowed them to lose trousers, skin on skin as Will yelped in surprise when Hannibal pushed him forward. Hands-on Will’s hips to keep him bent as Hannibal teased teeth over Will’s ass.

“I want to taste you,” Hannibal murmured, delighting when a gentle blow of air over Will’s hole made him groan, a fresh trickle of slick escaping as Will gripped onto the leather front seats. Keeping himself in an awkward position, though still presenting himself to Hannibal.

Hannibal gripped a fraction harder, feeling his arousal burning through his veins as he tasted the sweet slick.

The flavour erupted on his tongue, vanilla, and verbena. He could feel Will shake against him, hear the soft moan as the omega's body heated a fraction more. Eager to produce more slick, enticing Hannibal even more.

A mechanism to lure an alpha, to have him stake claim to the omega. And Hannibal let himself tumble into it, surging forward to taste Will again as he felt Will shake.

Teeth aching to bite and claim, knot begging to inflate with the urge to be seated inside of Will. To fill him, to claim and try to conceive.

“Alpha!” Will moaned, back arching, head tilting to the side to display his neck, where his scent gland was. An invitation to bite and claim.

Hannibal held back as he felt the need to rut forward, fingers sliding into Will, scissoring him to ensure he was lax enough. Drawing Will back to have his back rest against Hannibal’s chest as he felt the heat radiating from Will.

“If I bite you… claim you. I can’t undo it.” Hannibal spoke roughly, feeling the last tendrils of his control slipping. “You’ll be mine forever.”

“I want to be yours!” Will gasped, arching himself, turning to meet Hannibal’s eyes.

Gold flecked through Will’s ocean blues, pupils were blown and lips vivid pink. Will tilted his head, bearing his neck in acceptance. “Please.”

Hannibal felt his fingers slow, the world tilted on its axis as his own eyes began to sting. A glimpse in the mirror showed vibrant red, his rut beginning to take over as he tried to hold

back the baser instincts.

Slick dropped onto his cock, fingers leaving Will empty. The omega keened with the loss as Hannibal slicked himself then in one motion, pulled Will down onto his cock.

Bliss erupted within, heat swallowing him as Hannibal held Will close. Teeth sank into the back of the omega's neck to make him pliant, blood blooming over his tongue as Hannibal began to thrust hips.

He wasn't fully seated inside Will yet, knot brushing Will's rim as he kept teeth in the back of Will's neck.

Will's moans grew, some screams that had Hannibal growling with pleasure. The alpha within knew it was pain and pleasure that the omega felt.

Slick dribbled onto the leather, windows becoming fogged as Hannibal continued to rut before he slammed his knot in.

It swelled as Will let out a low keen, slow thrusts to keep the knot expanding as Hannibal lifted his head, feeling Will instinctively turn his head to bare his throat.

That was all Hannibal needed as he let teeth sink into Will's scent gland, coming inside of Will as he felt Will milking his knot for every drop.

A minute passed before hormones settled a fraction, some clarity returning as Hannibal gently kissed the claim upon Will's neck. Tongue lapped at the blood as fingers ran through Will's hair and massaged his body as they were joined.

"Alpha," Will spoke quietly, smiling.

"Omega." Hannibal purred back. "How you surprise me."

“Hmmm?” Will hummed with a sly grin.

“You triggered my rut,” Hannibal spoke, impressed at Will’s ability to make him lose control.

“And that’s a bad thing?” Will smirked.

“I wouldn’t wish to hurt you, not for our first time.” Hannibal gently kissed Will’s neck, feeling the omega shiver in delight.

“I like how it feels when you mark me.”

Hannibal groaned softly as his cock twitched, and another small rush of cum settled inside Will. “You are a temptress.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> me actually updating, and trying to get to good parts, so if it seems a little skipped. Probably. But it's going to be a long story because I haven't even gotten to any good parts yet! or what I'm dying to write. But this is also kind of vital to the story too.

Hannibal admired Will in his bed, cotton sheets over the omegas' body to cover but not overheat. The dark blue looked stunning against his skin. Black and blue bruises blooming on pale skin accentuated with the sheets.

People were already talking of Will. Hannibal was well aware when the light on his answering machine blinked while he made coffee. Multiple voicemails, no doubt Donald Sutcliffe among them. Some surreptitious message about their union. Or an invite for drinks.

As Hannibal sipped his coffee and listened, he listened to a message that came as a slight surprise. An offer to a dinner party held by Elanor Komeda.

It was customary for her to normally send an invitation, written exquisitely by hand. Not her own, but each was signed by Elanor Komeda, a flourish of ink that many held onto given the rarity of her invitations and small attendance numbers.

To receive a voicemail indicated late notice.

The few times Hannibal had been to the opera he’d been seen as an eligible bachelor. A rarity that at the age of 28 he was not mated. The last time he had been he had made a large donation, vying for a private booth that was to become available soon.

It seemed his donation played a more integral role, coming to the attention of the board director, Elanor Komeda. That or the news of his new mate, that he was no longer a bachelor made rumors circulate.

High society enjoyed discussing private lives more than listening to a Bach concert performed by the man himself. Eleanor Komeda did not simply invite people because of money. It was influence and power, along with being intriguing.

It was easy to return the call, to seal his place in the dinner party with a plus one that was extended.

He finished making his coffee, and one for Will. Something dark with a drop of sugar. It seemed fitting for the omega as he went back to his room. Revelation dawned on him happily that his home was not his own. But also now a place he would be happy to return to.

A construct of a home he wished to stay in longer, humming appreciatively as he watched Will's form stretch in the bed. His eyes fluttered open as Hannibal placed the coffee on the bedside table.

If it wasn't Will in his bed, there would not be a coffee waiting. The bedside draws would not be empty and waiting to be filled with what Will deemed he needed to put away and where.

Hannibal would have already taken his guest for the night out, a last kiss before they left with no intention of calling upon them again. But the guests he had bought back had never held him as captivated as Will did. Never smelt as delectable as his omega.

"What are you smiling about?" Will asked with a tired voice.

"I was thinking about how good you would look in a suit that was tailored." Hannibal lied smoothly, pretending to sip his coffee as he tried to detect any changes in Will's scent. A hint of his mixing with the omega's.

"I'd be happy to simply wear yours again," Will sat up, hair mused from sleep. Reaching for the coffee, a glance into the fine mug. A hesitation in holding it like it was fine china.

“If you are to meet my acquaintances, you should look the part.”

Will looked up, eyes narrowing a fraction before reading the seriousness in Hannibal’s features. A grimace ran through his features before he smoothed them over. “Can I just be the eye candy on your arm?” Eyebrows raised with a silent ‘again’ between them.

“I believe you could be a wonderful conversationalist if you desired.” Hannibal opened the small wardrobe of his apartment, flicking through as he chose his dress shirt for the day. Deliberately having his back to Will, watching the omega’s reaction in the peripheral of the mirror.

“It’s a pity, I prefer my suggestion.” Will smiled nefariously to himself as he took a sip of coffee. Eyes closing for a moment, appreciation. “Simply letting you converse with your acquaintances. I’d hate to say something untoward.” Will hummed. A hint of truth, a fear of speaking out of turn or saying something that would be held against Hannibal.

It was charming to think of Will speaking his mind so openly. Careless of the consequences. But while the omega could be cold if he wanted to, evident when Will spoke of his father. Will was young, and while the world had been cruel to him, his father had sheltered him greatly from the blunt brutality of people and their beliefs.

“Then allow me to dress you,” Hannibal murmured, thinking of a color combination for the omega.

“Because you haven’t picked out a selection of suits, trousers, and shirts for me to wear already?” Will teased. “You’ve already sized me up.”

It made Hannibal turn, his fondness for Will growing as he watched Will tilt his chin up with victory.

“Indeed.”

It would mean he'd have to hide other pieces of himself more carefully. Or distract Will's senses in other ways.

"But a tux has other requirements and I'd rather be sure the style suits you." Hannibal intoned.

"Peacocking me already?" Will sipped on his coffee again. Pointing his pinky finger out as though he was sitting at the Queen's table during tea. "Perhaps it's just the last of the hormones from my heat telling you to show me off subconsciously."

Hannibal smiled. "If you wish to be accepted into the police, it would be favorable to attend when the commissioner will be. To allow them to see that not only are you mated, but highly intelligent." Hannibal tilted his head. "It will also allow them to be aware that your alpha supports your endeavors into the police force."

Will shook his head. Biting his lower lip, he smiled back. "Still feels surreal to hear you say it."

"You'll be in the force by the end of the week," Hannibal spoke, coming over to kiss Will on the cheek.

"You already heading out to work?"

"Unfortunately," Hannibal spoke. "I've already made a few extra meals and kept them in the fridge for you to reheat."

"And what if I have plans to go out?" Will tilted his head provocatively.

"There is a wallet downstairs with cash and a card for you to use. Unfortunately, we only have one car between us for now, but I shall rectify it by the end of the week."

“Do I have a choice in what I get to drive?” Will bit his lip.

“Certainly.” Hannibal left to get his coat. “But I feel as though you have already decided.”

Will shook his head, smiling bashfully.

“You may have the Continental when I pick another.” Hannibal did up the buttons as he then paused for a moment, eyeing Will appreciatively in the bed, the hickeys on his neck, and the sapphire collar. “I will have to introduce you to my tailor later this week. I’m sure there would also be alternative options for collars if you like.”

“Would you allow me to pick out something for the party myself?” Will moved out of the bed, the sheet falling, pooling on the floor. Something that would normally irritate Hannibal he began to find enchanting as Will turned. Bright red marks were scrawled down Will’s back, like the notes of a symphony to be played, one that had been.

Hannibal paused, considering. “If you do not wish to wear a collar, I would not force you to.”

“I like the collar.” Will touched the white gold, finger feeling the cold weight of it and the links in the chain. Hannibal watched, entranced as Will shivered when he touched the mating claim. “I like to feel that you're with me even when you're not here.”

“I trust your judgment then.” Hannibal licked his lips, knowing if he stayed any longer he’d be late for work. Not from traffic, but from his baser instincts in claiming the omega again.

If he was late though, it would throw his plans out, and he’d been waiting to meet with the head of the psychiatric department for some time regarding transferring.

“I’ll have to write down my tailor’s address then, Perhaps you could surprise me and pick out your entire outfit.” Part of him was also curious to see what Will would choose. Then, he felt as though it was Will testing the waters of their very new relationship and trust in each other. Perhaps not as naive as what Hannibal contemplated him being. Pulling to find the invisible

leash Hannibal would not attach. “I’d prefer you to take a cab rather than walk the entire way in a new city.”

“Being rich is a superpower.” Will laughed as he headed towards the shower.

Hannibal watched Will leave, a feeling settling in his chest that he was unaccustomed to. Trickling from his heart. Caused his chest to tighten a fraction as he listened to Will turn the shower on.

Fear had a bitter tang to it.

-

The paperwork was neatly arranged, each section that required a signature marked.

Hannibal allowed Will to read over it, to see he had his own bank account, as well as joint accounts. The car transferred into his name, more than simply handing over the keys.

It was rare to see an omega hold their own bank account, as well as a car. Normally alphas held the assets. An omega would be able to access and use funds from an alpha's account or a joint account.

The only other situations that would arise where an omega held ownership of property or valuables was seen in estates. Normally managed by a trust.

Will had no trust, simply just access to what he wanted when he needed or wanted.

“Why did you do this?” Will asked as he looked over the paperwork, looking as though he was almost going to go crosseyed from the amount of detail in the writing.

“We have already bonded, if our bond were to break or we go our separate ways, you will still have your independence.” Hannibal asserted, straightening his jacket. Not wishing to voice his true intentions.

“Because you simply bonded with me to get your permanent residency?” Will shook his head. “It seems a bit much.” Will glanced at Hannibal for a long second.

“You allowed me to stay in this country and pursue my interests.” Hannibal surmised nonchalantly. “If anything about our relationship changes, if you decide to leave, I’d rather ensure you have the means to survive comfortably.”

Will turned his nose up, feeling like it was not exactly true. Or perhaps money was no real object to Hannibal. Glancing over some of the accounts, there was plenty of it. What had been put into his own account was barely a fraction of Hannibal’s wealth. “Because I’d be scrutinized by everyone for leaving my alpha? Or because my alpha found another omega, I would be deemed used goods?”

Hannibal felt his heart twist, a warmth seeping into his veins when Will called him his alpha before he frowned at the end of the sentence. Instead, though, he smiled.

The haste decision to bond with Will was something he didn’t hold any regret towards. He’d seen Will’s interest in him, but he was beginning to feel their relationship blossoming into more than simply alpha and omega. More than just hormones running their course as Will had put it so inelegantly before.

“You would be, and I would not allow you to sleep on the streets or beg for scraps.” Hannibal deadpanned. “You deserve more than simply trailing from boat yard to boat yard down the Mississippi.”

Will laughed, but Hannibal could see the appreciation in his eyes for the gesture.

When the pen was handed over to Will, he signed where he needed to, part of him feeling like he would never need his own belongings and accounts in reality.

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The pan sat on the stove, the liver inside cooking perfectly under Hannibal's watchful eye.

His body was tired, muscles aching slightly from the thrill of the hunt and the chase. The fight that had erupted when he'd found Tony out by the docks. Alone.

But harvesting the liver, thyroid, and cuts of meat from the alpha's back had been worth the long trip. For the alpha even daring to look at Will. The thought of such an alpha even touching his mate made Hannibal highly protective. He didn't want such actions to occur again.

It wasn't jealousy that made him kill, Hannibal simply cared for what was his. Will was not for others to touch or look at. Unless Hannibal deemed it appropriate. Such as the ball, others were allowed to gaze upon Will's beauty, to see him.

Hannibal would allow them to witness such beauty.

Tony tried to threaten to sell Will to a brothel like he was some common omega or whore. Dared to touch what Hannibal had told him was his alone. It wouldn't stand.

He'd been awfully rude.

The events needed to be arranged though, so Hannibal decided to opt for some honesty. He hadn't lied to Will when he stated he needed to return to Louisiana for the day, to turn in paperwork for their mating.

He'd been prepared to take Will with him, plying him with wine, and sedate him for the night to slip out in the cover of darkness to hunt down his prey.

Instead, Will had wanted to avoid returning. Hannibal didn't probe as to why, allowing Will to reflect alone in the apartment for the day, a promise to return by the end of it.

Hannibal kept his promise, coming home to find the apartment empty for the time being.

The notepad by the phone had a page missing, torn haphazardly. Hannibal had let fingers run over the paper, feeling the indentation of the pen, the familiar address of his tailor, and a smile that Will was trying to find a collar for the dinner party Komeda had invited them to.

So he cooked. Till he deemed the dish was done.

Plating the liver, Hannibal cut a few slivers. Plating them to enjoy by himself when the door opened. Will's scent followed before Hannibal watched his mate walk into the kitchen.

"Have you already started dinner?" Will spoke, looking at the plate.

"I believed I would be eating dinner alone." Hannibal smiled, moving over to kiss Will's neck, scenting the frustration upon his mate. The stench of others made him grip Will a little harder and pull him in for a rough kiss.

Instead of moving away, Will bared his neck, allowing Hannibal to do as he pleased.

Hannibal purred in approval before Will took a step away, heading to the plate as he grabbed a sliver of liver and ate it.

"S' good," Will said as he chewed. "Did you go shopping on the way home?"

Hannibal watched, enamored as Will licked his fingers, unknowing of what he was eating. "I found a new butcher."

“It’s nice, fresh.” Will nodded.

“It’s the best way to seal in the flavor.” Hannibal stepped forward, taking a slice as he fed it to Will, feeling his tongue lap at his fingers. How he wished Tony could see them now, how he’d served him to his mate.

“You’re enjoying this too much.” Will laughed but opened his mouth obediently.

“I didn’t believe many would appreciate the flavors and textures of the meat.” Hannibal breathed in Will’s scent mixing with the meat's own. Imagining blood dripping from Will’s mouth as he feasted upon a raw heart. “But I stand corrected.”

“What type of meat is it?

“Offal.” Hannibal fed Will another piece. “It’s rarely used in most dishes given people’s tendency to dislike the taste and texture. But when cooked appropriately, it is far more nutritious.”

“Butchers only serve certain offal.” Will hummed.

“They do.” Hannibal paused, waiting to hear more.

“I used to steal heart and liver from the butchers. Or lung. I hated kidneys. They used to mainly ground it up for dog meat. If it went missing, no one really cared.” Will looked down, rubbing the back of his neck as he admitted aloud some of what he considered far less savioury traits.

“A lesson you learned the hard way I take it?”

“I tried to steal a porterhouse once.” Will began to chuckle. “When the butcher found me, he took out his cleaver and threatened to cut my hand off.”

“And it was funny to you back then?” Hannibal tilted his head, encouraging more of the story.

“God no.” Will shook his head. “But looking back later I understand why he did it. Tried to instill a sense of morals into me.”

“It was not the morals you needed at that stage,” Hannibal spoke fondly, remembering when he used to steal sweets from the kitchen at the castle to give to Mischa. The nights he’d sneak into the kitchen when it was an orphanage and steal food to simply survive. The tins he’d collected when he’d moved into his uncle's home in fear of going without. “You simply needed nourishment.”

“I needed a lot of things in my childhood.” Will sighed, eyes flicking up, meeting Hannibal’s own for a moment. A desire to ask the question of his own childhood.

Hannibal instead leaned in again to steal another kiss, moving to tilt Will backward and reveal his neck as he let lips dance along his carotid. Coming back up to kiss him deeply. “Given you are free this evening, I believe it is the perfect time to show some of the collars I’ve been contemplating buying for you.”

“Not satisfied with your tailor?” Will teased.

“Hardly,” Hannibal smirked. “But I’d prefer to color-match the gems that I want to be adorned in them.”

“Not satisfied with sapphire and gold collars?”

“You are the crown jewel in my collection,” Hannibal hummed. “I want to ensure that you always stand out in the crowd, as you should.”

-

“How is mated life?” Donald Sutcliffe leaned against the door, eyebrows raised as Hannibal poured over patient notes. “Was the sex at least decent?”

“Discretion is the perfection of reason,” Hannibal spoke with a smirk.

Donald grinned wider, stepping into the room and closing the door. “Oh, a few extra surprises then. Leave it to the quiet ones to be great at things you would never expect.”

Hannibal pursed his lips, mentally noting something for a patient to investigate as he looked up to meet his colleagues' eyes. “How you continue to uphold patient confidentiality still astounds me.”

“Patients are off the table to discuss openly, friends and colleagues, however,” Donald shrugged. “You’re already the topic of discussion for the staff. They want to know who was able to capture Dr Lecter’s eye. There’s a bet going around that it is an arranged marriage.”

“And what did you include?”

“It wasn’t my story to kiss and tell,” Donald said slyly. “But we,” Donald cleared his throat. “Me and Amanda,” Hannibal looked up at that, a tilt of his head. “We were curious if you were going to hold a mating engagement. Given the deed is done.”

With a tap of his pen, Hannibal considered the idea, inviting a few people. Then again, hosting a party would require a venue, or making the move from an apartment to a house. Given all the paperwork had been signed, it would be viable to find a house suitable to call home. Though he’d need something large and with adjustments. Then again, Will would prefer something smaller. Neither of them had a family to involve.

“Certainly food for thought.” Hannibal inclined his head, mentally noting he’d need to send a letter to Lady Murasaki. Chiyoh would want to be invited.

He’d rather have a small reception before too many people became involved.

“Well, I want the first invite,” Donald smirked. “Open bar too.”

-

A final look in the mirror had Will hoping the collar he’d picked out would please Hannibal.

Intricately patterned chains adorned his neck, leading down to his chest. But the space between the chain allowed the mating claim to show through.

“Are you ready, darling?” Hannibal paused as he opened the door.

Will saw his eyes dart down to the collar, the small lick of his lips and creases around the alpha's eyes. Genuine pleasure.

“Do you like?” Will didn’t need to ask, but he wanted to know.

“Stunning,” Hannibal spoke, eyes taking in Will’s beauty and the collar that adorned his neck. The way it would stand out in any given light.

“To reduce you to one word seems like it had the desired impact.” Will felt his cheeks heat, ducking his head as he smirked.

Stepping closer, Will tilted his neck, seeking Hannibal’s touch against the mark. He shivered when he felt Hannibal’s lips instead.

“I didn’t think bonding would be like this?” Will breathed.

“Like what exactly?” Hannibal asked curiously.

Will had heard some omegas talk about it, how bonding made them feel happy, complete in a way. “Perhaps it’s just the last of the hormones from my heat.”

Hannibal laughed gently. “It is different for each pair.”

“How do you feel?” Will asked.

Hannibal paused for a moment, Will knowing he was choosing his words carefully. “You are the person who made me believe there truly was someone out there who was able to understand me.”

Will felt his cheeks go red.

-

Will stayed at Hannibal’s side as they came to the front door, smiled politely when it opened and they were greeted by a female alpha.

“Good evening, Mrs Komeda.” Hannibal smiled. “My mate, Will Lecter.”

“Good evening.” Will bowed his head a fraction then stood to show Hannibal’s claim upon his neck, a southern tradition to acknowledge his alpha. That he was off the market.

“Hannibal, please. Call me Eleanor. And my, Will, you look beautiful tonight.” Eleanor Komeda ushered them inside. “How long ago did you two meet?”

Her eyes met Will's own and he shied away. Silently deferring to Hannibal to answer as he wished.

"There must remain some mystery to my personal life." Hannibal winked.

Eleanor smiled before Hannibal led Will towards the small crowd of the party.

Will stayed silent, close to Hannibal's side, accepting the flute of champagne as people around them talked. A few glances already shot towards them.

"Well I must know where you found Will, I've never seen him at the opera before!" A man came over, hand stuck out.

Will placed it there to shake but the beta lifted it to his lips and kissed the back. Hannibal smiled tightly.

"Blair, it is wonderful to see you." Hannibal greeted. "This is my mate, Will Lecter."

"And already mated!" Blair boomed.

Will drank from the flute to hide his eyes, and Hannibal stood a little taller.

"How is the progress coming along for the next show?" Hannibal swiveled the conversation.

Will turned to glance at Hannibal, a silent exchange that he was going to get some hor devours to give them a reason to not get into any discussion given Blair's already loud exclamation on their bonding.

When Will returned, Hannibal excused himself. Will overheard the words about newly bonded pairs. But he didn't care as he handed a cracker with a quail egg over to Hannibal. Taking a bite and frowning at the bitter taste.

"You should host one of these, the food would be better," Will said quietly. "No doubt your acquaintances would like you to host some kind of party. They haven't stopped talking about me."

"You look breathtaking in that collar with my mark on display." Hannibal purred. "You have always turned heads. Even in Louisiana."

"They're not looking at me for beauty," Will ducked his head. "Blair's wife already has multiple reasons why you would have been better off marrying her beta daughter." Then Will looked to the far corner. "An omega over there is upset you did not choose her, she's tried to hold your attention before." Will then shrugged towards Eleanor Komeda. "Eleanor is the only one who seems to be genuinely curious about you and seems to know why we're mated."

Hannibal smiled, impressed at Will's ability to read people, noticing how his features shifted from each person, the slight change of voice. Empathy.

"Eleanor Komeda mated with a female omega. Many rumors circulated about their bond simply being for her to stay in America."

"Makes sense," Will smirked. "Where is her mate?"

"She died during childbirth only a year ago," Hannibal said solemnly.

"Oh," Will looked down.

"Rumour has it that she has been looking for another mate," Hannibal spoke, curious to know if Will would look to see.

Will did, watching her poise, the way she held her glass, and the sad glint within her eyes. He met her eyes briefly before he looked away. “No,” Will said coldly.

There was a shaky breath, a tear in Will’s eye. “She was her mate and their child. She could never love another the same, they were soul mates.”

Hannibal turned Will’s head a fraction. “Tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

“You’re going to quote Shakespeare to me?” Will laughed as the tear ran down his cheek.

“Alfred Tennyson. He lost a friend when he was young, what many believe was a true mate given Alfred was an omega and his friend was an alpha.” Hannibal murmured. Hand reaching up to wipe the tear away. “Soul mate is a word most commonly used and believed to be capable by betas. But omega and alpha relationships are more complex.”

“So is your cooking.” Will smiled, leaning against Hannibal’s side. “Where did you learn to cook?”

“Old family recipes, chefs that were employed under my aunt and uncle.” Hannibal smiled. “Cooking magazines written in French.”

Will snorted his champagne, covering his mouth quickly to hide his grin. “Not just some Betty Crocker catalog?”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

Will shook his head. “I was joking.”

“I wasn’t,” Hannibal spoke with a smile.

“You should do this for the party you’re trying to hold.”

“What party is that exactly?”

“The one that Donald left a message about, that he states he wants an invite to. The one that he’s not invited to.”

“It is traditional to hold a feast,” Hannibal mused, not missing how Will was trying to vie for his attention with discussion of his cooking.

“With your cooking, it would be different. I’ve never enjoyed offal until you cooked it for me.”

Hannibal hummed, considering. Knowing his dishes would be unique, it seemed most were unable to detect the difference in taste between the meat. That and he would enjoy feeding Will strips of alpha again.

“I wish I could cook like you.” Will sighed.

“Then I will teach you what I know. For now though,” Hannibal purred in Will’s ear. “I believe the commissioner is dying to meet you.”

Will looked up to see an alpha a few feet away. “Did you already put me on his radar?”

“I may have donated to the police foundation for the benefit of Baltimore and Maryland.” Hannibal shrugged.

“What!” Will hissed.

“To ensure your place.” Hannibal smiled into his champagne as he took a sip. “I believe he is waiting to be introduced. Shall we?”

Will looked at Hannibal’s elbow, wondering what stars had aligned to land him with the alpha. Then there was an unceremonious push that made Will walk, heading to the commissioner as Hannibal introduced them.

Chapter 5

Hunting had enabled Hannibal to hone some of his instincts. To many, it looked like he was sipping casually from his flute of champagne.

In his peripheral vision though, he watched Will.

Something instinctual made him keep his eye on his mate.

Perhaps simply because it was he was near another alpha. Or many were discussing their new bond, the impromptu nature of it, how they had never met Will before.

It was nothing to do with how Will was smiling, dazzling the commissioner with his charm, and discussing his hopes of becoming a good detective.

Will's place on the force was already attained, he'd start the next week. A uniform was already being sent to their apartment, a custom collar for Will to wear if he wanted.

Hannibal's head tilted slightly towards the conversation, eager to hear the details of Will's dreams. Knowing Will had not truly opened up about all his hopes and ambitions to him fully yet.

Still, Will was an enigma wrapped in a riddle for Hannibal to pull apart as he desired.

Letting Will be part of the police could prove to be useful, enabling Hannibal to gain inside information. Alas, keep another inspector out of his hair.

"Jealousy looks good on you."

Hannibal tilted his head, a smile playing on his lips while he studied Elanor Komeda stalking forward. “Is it not normal for one to feel protective of their mate.”

“Protective implies wanting to create a safe environment for their mate to call home.” Elanor smiled back, something glinting in her eyes. “Jealousy is wanting to keep them from the world for yourself. It becomes more possessive.”

“It is not instinct to shelter who we love?” Hannibal spoke, keeping an eye on Will, watching the commissioner grow closer to his omega.

Elanor Komeda simply smiled wider. “I would not blame you.” She spoke honestly. “If I still had Kristen, I’d never allow her to leave the house. I’d keep her under lock and key.”

She sipped champagne again as Hannibal found his attention drifting to her. “For her protection, of course. But what life would she have led if I took such possession of her?”

Hannibal understood the implications, keeping Will safe, taking him away from the world would only make him crave it more. Will could not be contained by boundaries that Hannibal enforced. He’d always find a way to climb the walls and escape. “You wouldn’t be protecting her, it would be a selfish act to protect your own heart.”

“You have lost someone important to you along the way.” Elanor came closer, a hand raised to touch Hannibal’s cheek. “But this is the first time I have seen someone hold your interest. One could argue you are obsessed.”

“This is the first time we have had a private conversation.” Hannibal mused, feeling Elanor’s hand slip away. He could not help but feel like Elanor had dug into his history given her statements.

“The Baltimore Opera Society has a valuable reputation, we are a pillar of the community. I spent a decade of my life making it what it is today.” Elanor held up her flute in a silent toast to herself.

The silent ‘I’m not about to let anyone ruin my hard work’ rang in Hannibal’s mind.

“The very reason I intend to purchase the private booth when it becomes available.” Hannibal tried to deflect.

“Yet you title your application with Doctor and not Count?”

Hannibal smiled as he took a drink of his champagne, not overly impressed. It was not too difficult to look up his nobility if someone truly wanted to. “I prefer to use titles that have been earned rather than ones naturally assigned as a birthright.”

It seemed to impress Elanor, a gentle laugh from her. “The booth is yours. I’d already approved it before I called you.”

“Was this the final test?” Hannibal asked.

“You passed it the first time I met you, again when you introduced yourself and your mate,” Elanor spoke, a glance behind as she smirked. “You might have to swoop in and save him. The commissioner does like to get quite handsy.”

Hannibal turned instinctively, seeing Will laugh, the commissioner’s hands nowhere near him.

When he looked back to Elanor, she stood tall, proud. A knowing smile. “He will be your undoing.”

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The uniform was made of a different fabric, smoother, finer. No doubt made for omegas as Will pulled it on and felt more comfortable by the second.

Hannibal stood behind him, watching, admiring Will and his reflection.

“I thought it would take me years,” Will said more to himself, but smiling when he looked at Hannibal. “Thank you.”

“It was won on your own merits,” Hannibal replied.

“We both know that isn’t true, I skipped the screening procedure.” Will shook his head, knowing it was Hannibal’s donation that got him into the Baltimore police department. Not his intelligence as Hannibal kept insisting.

“There may have been a few things, but they were happy to accept you with the signed paperwork.” Hannibal turned down Will’s collar. A thumb rubbing over the badge. “I made you a promise.”

“That you kept.” Will turned.

“I always keep my promises,” Hannibal murmured, leaning in to kiss Will. “You will be late if you stay here any longer.”

-

It was supposed to be his dream job, one that he could do something with. Make a difference in the world.

It was only his second week, part of the 6 week on the job training program.

A ‘crash course’ is what some of the other officers had stated gruffly. ‘Specifically designed for omegas so they could go home each night, be gentled by their alpha. Be scented and

marked’.

After two weeks, Will could understand why.

It wasn’t the job that got him down, the hours he had to put in, the study he had to do to learn the codes and what to do in situations.

He was already contemplating quitting, speaking to a handful of other officers. Not because of the work or what was required of him. Simply from how the other officers looked at him. How he was treated differently.

Alphas bumped shoulders with him, wanting Will to let out a whine or cower away. To display typical omega behavior as they described it.

They gave him safe assignments because he was an omega. Less chance of being hurt. Things like walking the beat, and giving out tickets. Things that bored Will half to death.

Still, Will did his job. He turned up, he kept doing what they asked, looking less enthused and sighting potential safety concerns.

When Will quit then, didn’t they tried different tactics.

That is what the alphas believed would be the undoing, a way to get him out and back to live in Hannibal’s apartment.

They decided to send him to homicide for the day to ‘help out’. To look at the grotesque photos of victims, to study killers.

The alphas and betas who played along wanted to make Will shake with fear. Some of the officers Will had talked about some of his concerns with. They thought it would be the final nail in the coffin, that he would quit.

They didn’t expect him to smile like he did.

They hadn’t anticipated that Will had played them to get to his goal quicker and sooner.

Will walked through the door, keeping his eyes averted. When he stopped and looked up at the board, he took in the scenes.

There were a few photos of victims and many more of the scenes. A few bits of information about suspects, last known sightings, and potential clues.

Some were cases Will had overheard discussions about, read about in papers, and studied secretly.

The biggest case they had at the moment that was starting to make the news and paint the police department in a poor light was the case of escorts being killed and shoved into bins.

“Detective Lever,” Will knocked on the office door, watching the alpha look up, eyes roaming over him before he narrowed them.

“You must be doing something right.” The detective spoke.

“Why would you say that sir?”

“Normally takes about three months before they send the omegas this way.” The detective stood. “Call me Dave.”

Will looked at the hand, moved forward, and shook it. “I’m not the first then?”

“And you won’t be the last,” Dave smirked. “You played them well.”

Will looked down, clearing his throat. “I don’t understand, sir.”

“Dave.” He repeated. “And you know what I mean. I’ve seen you speaking to the officers, hearing the rumors of how they get rid of people. The fake concern you have shown over coming here.”

“It’s far more interesting than walking the street, Dave.” Will took a seat.

Dave smiled back, silently impressed. “They say omegas have a tendency to be empathetic, a trait used biologically to appease their alpha’s and understand their wants or desires.”

“To be able to trigger certain responses. I’m aware of what is written.” Will deadpanned.

“You studied the wall behind you when you came in,” Dave replied. “Tell me what you see?”

“A profile of a killer.” Will turned to look at the wall again. “Someone who lives in the area or has access. He knows those bins well, knows there’s no security camera footage, it’s lower class neighborhood. People don’t go out alone at night around those areas is what I have come to understand.”

“And what of the killer?” Dave leaned back, a small smile appearing on his lips.

“White, like the victims, it’s rare for killers to kill outside their ethnicity, and this doesn’t show any indications of being a hate crime. It’s escalation, he bound his victims before he strangled them…” Will paused, turning back and deciding how to choose his next words. “There would be escorts. Street workers who know him. Or suspect him, they don’t tend to talk to the police. But there is bound to be someone who can attest to the fact he’s been rough

with them before. He might still do it, rough them up, pay them well, and then leave. These victims are the ones he couldn't stop himself with, where he lost control."

"But is it a loss of control?" Dave tilted his head.

Will could feel his hands around the throat of a victim, feeling her try to breathe beneath him, the look of fear in her eye, the feeling of power he held over her. The ability to choose if she lived or died. No care for status, omega, or beta. Not even alpha."

"He's a beta."

-

Rain poured as Will left for the day, driving around Baltimore as he looked at the city with fresh eyes. A different perspective and appreciation.

Pulling over, Will looked down one of the many alleys in Baltimore. One that had already been utilized by the killer he was now hunting.

As Will started the car again, a flash of white caught his eye, a cardboard box moved as Will looked at it.

Unable to stop himself, Will turned the engine off, taking out the keys as he walked towards the alley. Passing the very bin the killer had used.

The stench was foul, nothing like a body, but enough Will had the urge to cover his nose.

That's when the box moved again and the little cream and white dog bolted from the box and went behind the dumpster.

Will smiled, kneeling as he listened to thunder boom in the distance.

“Yeah, I don’t like it when it rains either.” Will chuckled, smiling openly as the dog looked at him.

It stepped out a little more. He reached out, palm sideways as the dog moved forward, a tentative sniff before it snorted, unimpressed at the lack of food available.

“Well, if you come home with me, I’ll find something to your liking,” Will spoke sweetly, letting a hint of southern drawl out that he’d always tried to hide.

The mention of food made the dog’s ears perk up, a few more tentative steps before it cowered under Will for protection from the rain.

Taking his coat off, Will placed it around the dog, using it as a security blanket while he carried it back to the car.

Will groaned as the dog shrugged off the coat and began to shake. Hair sticking to the leather and the scent of wet dirty dog growing. But when he saw the dog wagging its tail, he felt his troubles melt away.

“You look like a Zoe, how do you feel about that?” Will spoke, looking at the ribs sticking out on the dog, the gunk around it’s eyes, the neck that was bereaved of a collar. “I don’t know about you, but I could use a shower.”

-

Hannibal twitched his nose as he scented Will and… wet hair, garbage, moth-eaten fabric, and dog.

As the door to their apartment clicked gently closed, he heard Will trying to tiptoe past the living room.

Hannibal moved to the end of the small hallway as he stood next to the bathroom door. Waiting.

Will looked towards the kitchen as he sneaked around, the jacket Hannibal had just bought him was wet and bundled under his arm, as well as moving.

“Hello, darling.”

“Jesus!” Will jumped, turning to see Hannibal standing at the end of the hallway. “You scared me!”

Hannibal smiled a little wider. “I see you got caught in the rain.”

Will shifted, trying to awkwardly hide his jacket. “Ummm yeah.”

“It must be raining cats and dogs outside.” Hannibal nodded to the jacket.

“I…” Will looked at the jacket, a sheepish expression on his face.

But Hannibal didn’t wait, he’d expected Will to bring a dog home at some point. The timing seemed to be impeccable as he walked forward and kissed the crown of Will’s head. “I could smell you both before you entered the apartment.”

“Then you know I couldn’t leave her outside.” Will looked up with pleading eyes.

“Most certainly not, but an apartment is no place for a dog.” Hannibal mused.

“I’m just going to give her a bath and…” Will fell silent because he had intended to keep her.

“Perhaps we should take a drive,” Hannibal spoke, watching fear dart through Will’s expression. “Do you trust me?”

Will looked down at Zoe, watching her sneeze before he hung his head and gave a nod. A belief that Hannibal was about to take Zoe to the pound.

“I know an apartment isn’t a suitable place for a dog, but I promise to take her out and look after her.” Will tried to acquiesce his situation.

“I don’t doubt you would.” Hannibal moved away, grabbing his coat to place over Will as he took another.

Will hugged Zoe a little tighter. But he followed Hannibal, ducking his head as they stepped out into the rain, into the passenger side of Hannibal's Bentley.

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Will patted Zoe’s head. Smiling when she licked his cheek. Hannibal felt his lip twitch.

When the car stopped, Will looked up, expecting to see the pound. Instead, there was a house. Hannibal had already gotten out of the car, coming to open the door as Will looked at him.

“You can’t just dump her in the street and drive off,” Will spoke.

“Most certainly not,” Hannibal smiled. “Wouldn’t you prefer that I show you both around instead?”

Will stopped for a moment, stunned as Hannibal held up a set of keys, then looked to see the for sale sign with sold upon it.

“You bought a house?”

“We bought a house,” Hannibal pulled Will from the car, taking him to the front door and opening it up.

Will stepped inside, looking around the space. It was bare bones, empty, void. But full of possibilities. Palace he could call home.

Hannibal took Zoe from his arms and set the dog down with a pat on its head. “She’s the first of many strays I believe you will come home with.”

Zoe barked, wagging her tail as she took off to explore. Hunger was forgotten, or perhaps just excitement to be inside a house even though it was empty.

“I wanted to surprise you, just as you wanted to surprise me.” Hannibal hummed as he came to hug Will gently from behind, letting his cheek brush against Will’s own as he scented him.

“I just didn’t want to see her suffering,” Will said a little hoarse.

Hannibal placed a set of keys into Will’s hand, closing his fingers around it. “It needs some work, but I’ll have contractors come in soon to begin.”

“I can do a few things.” Will smiled. “Maybe not electrical or working in your kitchen. But I can build a few things.”

They stepped further into the house, pausing by the dilapidated kitchen. “Like an island counter in here.”

“I’d like that very much,” Hannibal smirked, eager to see Will create something for him to use. A surface to place the omega upon and ravish him later. “We move in the next fortnight, but I have a feeling we may have to move the date forward so someone has a place to live.”

Will laughed as Zoe came back in, tail wagging madly as she barked at them. Turning, Will leaned in, stealing a kiss. “Thank you.”

“We only have a few weeks to prepare before I host our dinner party.” Hannibal stroked his fingers through Will’s curls, delighting when Will went a little wide-eyed. “More of a housewarming slash bonding dinner party. I only invited a few guests.”

Looking down, Will felt his nerves ignite, Hannibal knew he didn’t like to be in crowds already. Preferring to stick to his side and let the alpha talk and carry the conversation. “How far away is it?”

“A month should be ample time to have the downstairs area completed. At least the dining room and foyer.”

Will gave a nod. “You already made plans on what to have done downstairs?”

“I did.” Hannibal tilted his head curiously. “But they can be adjusted if you have an idea.”

“No,” Will shook his head, biting his lower lip. “But I want to try something different.”

It was easy for Will to lean in, another kiss, longer and slower. Hands came up to grip onto Hannibal’s shirt before he grabbed it and used it to push the alpha so his back went to the kitchen bench.

Lashes fluttered closed, when Will looked back at Hannibal, he was beginning to kneel, seeing Hannibal's eyes turn darker with lust.

Knees hit the dusty floor, and Hannibal let a hand come to comb through Will's curls. Then tilted his chin, baring Will's neck.

Will lets his teeth undo the zip, hands pulling trousers down.

Hannibal was already hard, a bulge as Will noted the difference in size. As he freed his cock, he admired the way it stood, a husky hue on the tip.

Lips gently kissed the velvety soft skin before Will opened and tried to take it all at once.

It ended in him gagging, drawing back slightly as he tried again.

"Slowly," Hannibal hummed, as Will looked up through tear-stained lashes. "Tilt your head back, open your throat."

Gentle hands guided Will's head, adjusting as Will felt his throat open and then the gentle slide as Hannibal pushed forward.

Will still felt himself gag, but Hannibal took control of how much cock he took.

Pre cum slid over his tang providing a salty tang as Will salivated and spread his legs as he felt something inside begin to calm him.

"Very good," Hannibal gentled him, a hand massaging the nape of his neck as Will began to feel hazy. It was biology that Will calmed, and became more lax as his gag reflex began to diminish.

The constant pressure on his nape and alpha hormones in his cum made Will begin to simply take what he was given.

Betas called it subspace, for omegas, it was part of grooming, also known as gentling. A more sexual component but used for new mates more often to help their bodies begin to sync into their cycles of heat and rut.

“Alpha,” Will breathed as Hannibal removed his cock, tilting Will’s head up. Thumb ran over his lip to smear the juices, delighting in how Will responded by opening to take his thumb.

Hannibal smiled, kneeling to taste Will and himself upon the omega’s lips.

Then he stood, letting pants pool onto the dirty floor as Will opened his mouth obediently.

Pink lips stretched wider as Hannibal fed Will his cock, a small gag when he was fully seated. As Will’s throat convulsed around him, Hannibal felt his knot begin to inflate.

For a brief second, Will looked up, their eyes meeting.

Will’s pupils blew wide as he understood what Hannibal wanted, the roughness and marks he’d promised to leave. Most omegas would have been afraid, shying away from such an act in taking their alpha. Let alone letting them knot their mouth. The feeling of suffocation.

Will spread his legs wide, bending so Hannibal could apply pressure to his neck.

Hannibal did, a hand at the back to gentle his omega as his free hand moved through curls and gripped as he began to thrust.

It was gentle at first, a few spasms from Will as he tried to accommodate. But the rougher Hannibal became, Will's became wet, lashes fluttering as he tried to take it.

Hannibal felt his cock respond. Thrusting hard again as Will choked and the head of his cock nudged the back of Will's throat.

It didn't take long for Hannibal to come as Will swallowed him, wet flushed cheeks and dark eyes. Throat spasming around Hannibal's cock, drinking what he could, knot infkated and unable to move from between Will's teeth.

Some spilled down Will's chin, a pitiful whine at the loss as Will went to move before Hannibal's hand came down and made him stop.

Will had struggled at first before relaxing as Hannibal gentled him again.

Hannibal bent down, impressed with Will's resilience to take him. Despite knowing it would be difficult, he couldn't help but let out a proud rumble as he kept touching his mate. Ensuring Will was comfortable despite the position.

"Next time, I'll be sure to have you somewhere you can rest." Hannibal murmured as he waited for his knot to go down.

Minutes passed before it did, feeling it lessen as Will's tongue moved. A gentle kiss before Will freed himself with Hannibal's hand to guide him.

"Is it what you expected?" Hannibal asked, curious as to what Will had wanted.

The flush was still in his cheeks, and as Will averted his gaze, Hannibal saw that Will got off on it. A rush of hormones, a taste of Hannibal filling his senses.

As Will stumbled a little standing, Hannibal moved, sweeping him up to sit him on the bench. A kiss, tasting himself upon Will's tongue made him hum, and Will opened more, accepting Hannibal as he spread his legs and tried to pull the alpha in.

"You feel so good," Will breathed. "Why do you smell like perfection?"

"What do you smell?" Hannibal murmured, moving to open the front of Will's shirt, fingers coming down to twist Will's nipple in his finger as he watched Will arch himself beautifully on the counter.

"Forests," Will breathed as he then gasped. "Like the forest after it snows, pristine pine and frost that hangs in the air, seeping into my lungs."

Will moaned when Hannibal pushed him down onto the bench, lips sealing around his nipple with a brutal suck. Hannibal's hand went down to free Will's pants as fingers delved between his cheeks, probing, finding slick as he started to open him up.

"Tempting thing," Hannibal breathed, looming over Will as he looked at his sprawled on the counter, cheeks flushed and pupils blown.

Will didn't protest as his pants were removed, helping to kick them to the floor.

Hannibal moved in one swift motion down to take Will in his mouth. Finger delved inside of him to open him up, spreading to widen his hole, using the slick for its intended purpose until Hannibal moved to lap at it.

Will whined as Hannibal used his tongue, feeling it slip inside, the brush of teeth. Threatening yet so good. He felt his hole wink, opening for Hannibal, accommodating for his alpha as Will let his hand move down to tug at ashen curls.

They shared another kiss, Will tasting himself this time as Hannibal moved in closer, lining himself up.

Each moan Will produced was swallowed by Hannibal, sensations overloading as he was fucked on the counter while Hannibal gripped him close, lips either on Will's own or moving to his neck. Dancing over the claim he'd left only a few weeks ago, making blood bloom beneath the skin to bruise and amplify the sensation.

Will came as Hannibal pulled Will closer, feeling Hannibal come just after his orgasm as he fell against Hannibal's chest, spine curved and chest heaving.

"I like it when you decide to surprise me," Hannibal murmured roughly.

"Does this mean I can get a second dog?" Will breathed out smiling.

Hannibal looked down, tilting Will's chin up. "It was already understood that one would not suffice," Hannibal smirked, impressed with Will's manipulations. "What is it that you truly desire?"

"I'm assisting with homicide on a case, and I need you to approve it." Will looked sheepishly.

"And you believed that sex would produce the desired outcome?" Hannibal stole a kiss, savoring the taste of them combined. "You could have asked."

"Maybe, but I wanted it to be something special." Will took a breath. "I wanted to think about this when I walk back into the office, to feel how much you wanted me."

"Always," Hannibal let his forehead rest against Will's own for a second. "Gentling does not have to necessarily simple grooming, it can be whatever makes you feel calmer."

"You enjoy it when you're rough with me." Will breathed. "I like it when all I can sense is you."

Hannibal bit back the groan he wanted to make, purring proudly instead. Already knowing he would be daily leaving his mark upon Will, making their relationship grow stronger. “I’ll sign those papers for you tomorrow, darling.”

Chapter 6

The leaves scattered along the ground as the season changed, much like most things in Will's life since meeting Hannibal Lecter. Moving from the intimate, well-worn confines of their apartment to a house felt like stepping into a larger, more unpredictable world.

It was a change that both thrilled and terrified him.

On the concrete near the letterbox was a copy of the Baltimore newspaper. Will looked at the cover, noting the photos of politicians and other events. An absence of the beta and omegas sex workers who were being found in dumpsters of the Pigtown neighborhood. So far there had been another two, and Will knew he'd receive another envelope with photos soon if the killer wasn't caught.

"It feels surreal to have a place to ourselves," Will spoke, his eyes tracing the shadows playing across the front door. It was a far cry from the shacks and boats he'd come to call home with his father.

Bricks and mortar, solid foundations to begin building upon further. Will watched a smile flicker across Hannibal's lips. The alpha within proudly displayed that he would care for Will. And Will couldn't say he didn't appreciate it.

"A house provides a new canvas, Will. It offers us space to grow, to cultivate our interests and, perhaps, find new ones."

Will chuckled softly. "Like gardening?" A look at the bare exterior of the house as Will pictured the American dream of a white picket fence surrounding the house. He shook his head, stepping back and grabbing a box from the car, smiling as he looked at Hannibal's precise handwriting on the boxes.

Hannibal turned, his gaze resting on Will with the kind of intensity that always seemed to pierce through his skin and strike within him. His heart skipped a beat as Will felt his cheeks grow hot.

Hannibal's lips curved into a rare, genuine smile. "Perhaps. It is a space that is our own, no thin walls or interruptions."

Will flushed as he thought of how loud he could scream, wondering if Hannibal would be more passionate. Delve more into some traditions such as tying him up during his heat to breed him.

"I thought you simply wanted a bigger kitchen to dabble in your culinary exploits." Will smiled flirtatiously.

"I intend to explore all savory desires," Hannibal added with a glint in his eye, the double entendre unmistakable.

“How will you pass the time while they build a kitchen for you?” Will spoke in a southern drawl, watching Hannibal’s eyes darken.

“Perhaps I should hunt for something to keep me occupied in the meantime.” Hannibal lowered his gaze.

Will took off with the box, hearing Hannibal give chase easily.

Sprinting into the house as he dropped the box at the front door and ran up the stairs, heading to the bedroom.

He was only on the second flight when Hannibal caught him, swiveling him around before he picked him up, placing him against the wall as he kissed parted lips. Tongues meeting, twisting as Will moaned into the kiss and rocked his hips, feeling Hannibal already hard.

“We don’t have a bed here yet!” Will yelped as Hannibal kissed and nipped at his neck.

“Then I’ll have to hold you up here, prepare you myself, and hold you still.” Hannibal breathed.

Will bit into his lip, Hannibal sucking a bruise on his neck near his collar. One he knew he’d feel for days.

“Does the plumbing work?” Will breathed.

Hannibal hummed. “What are you thinking darling?”

“There is a box of clothes and towels in the car, you don’t have to simply hold me up.”

Hannibal smiled a little wider. “Maybe I like to hold you on my cock.”

Will moaned softly, stealing Hannibal’s lips for a kiss as he nipped at the bottom lip playfully. “I like that.”

For a moment, Hannibal smiled before he then took Will’s arms, lifting them above his head, and proceeded to begin ravishing him on the wall.

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Sure enough, when Will came back to work, there was an envelope on his desk.

The bright yellow was nearly an inch thick with photos and reports. From the new victim and from previous evidence they were still processing. Every detail the police had laid out on sheets of paper and shown in the crime scene photos.

The only reason they had another body, was that the killer had lost control again.

Will sat down, flipping through the photos, wondering what this poor beta woman had done to anger her killer. Was it a simple flippant remark, perhaps the way she looked at him? Maybe she had simply talked back.

In the end, it set the killer off. He lost control, pushing him over the edge as he took her life.

For a moment as Will looked at the photos, he felt like he could feel his heart beat fast and heavy in his chest. The breathless sensation and silence that came with taking a life within the car. How his fingers would still tingle from pulling the rope around the woman's neck till there was give.

A sharp thump to the board drew his attention to the wall near Dave's desk, the new photo of the victim being hung. Her face was bright, her smile open, eyes distant. Unlike the pained dead gaze she held in the photos Will held.

The lack of publicity in the papers made bile rise up in Will's stomach. But it was good for them in some respect, the killer didn't have an alias, didn't have fame making him puff his chest out and motivate him to leave the house.

"He's getting sloppy," Dave spoke, looking at the board.

"He lost control again," Will remarked, feeling like he was a broken record. "He doesn't plan the murders, but he covers his tracks afterwards."

Flipping through a few more photos, Will paused as he looked at the garbage bag, the woman's body wrapped inside. Completely intact.

"Was she found like this?" Will spoke, given he'd heard no news about the murder before he came in. But surely Dave would have seen it.

Each other body that had been found had been done so by workers emptying the bins, the truck had normally destroyed most of the evidence.

Now though, they had a whole body. One that had been fitted through a small hole. Not by the top due to the padlock.

"A drifter found the body, thought it was clothing or something bundled up," Dave spoke.

"He's used this dump site before," Will said, looking through more photos. "He knows the schedule. Bet he wasn't expecting the padlock. How do you fit a body through that hole and not get scratched?"

Dave froze for a moment. "You think he hurt himself getting her in?"

"Pushing a whole body in." Will held up a photo. "The bags covering it have been ripped and opened from the effort. He probably scratched or cut himself doing it. Wouldn't hurt to go knocking from door to door."

"If he left evidence behind we need to get onto that dumpster and search it for prints and blood samples," Dave spoke, heading towards his own desk.

"It would have made a hell of a noise too, going around may get people to start talking." Will watched, licking his lips. "Sending a bunch of alphas in wouldn't help when you try and ask questions."

“The answer is no before you even try it.” Dave threw a glare at Will. “The commissioner would never sign off on it. And your mate shouldn’t either.”

“Better to have an omega come and assist, alphas are not the target. They won’t truly care, not when our killer’s target is those who work the streets.” Will shrugged.

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“Who the hell is your mate anyway?” Dave spoke quietly as they stood out at the first door in the apartment blocks near the dumpster. Wondering How Will was signed off on coming out to assist.

“A doctor,” Will shrugged. Not mentioning the commissioner was happy to approve when Hannibal had been generous in his original donation.

“That’s all your going to give me?” Dave glared. “You know I can look up your file, find out who your mate is.”

“I kept my maiden name for work. ‘Graham’. I’m used to it anyway.” Will spoke, though he’d never looked at what Hannibal had done. If it was hyphenated or ‘Lecter’.

“Right,” Dave spoke, raising his hand as he knocked on the first door.

Will stood just behind Dave. It was normal for an omega to stay behind an alpha, but Will wanted the distance. He didn’t want to get close, to start a conversation or hold eye contat. A few people looked at him, omega and betas were pleased his presence while a few alphas glared, either raising their voices or slamming the door in their faces.

The few times Will did ask questions, he got curious glances. Dave stood up for him, asking the alphas more so to answer. Begrudgingly, they did because an alpha reminded them.

Will came to the next door, watching Dave knock when it opened only a fraction of the way.

“I don’t know anything about what happened, please. I have children sleeping.” The woman spoke, voice wavering. Fear evident.

Dave was about to leave it when Will spotted the marks on the woman’s neck through the door. “Can you tell me about those bruises?” The same dark bruises had appeared on the victims' necks as well.

Will lodged his foot into the door, preventing it from being shut as he looked at the woman, saw her hands shaking.

“They look about three days old,” Will pushed open the door a little further when the woman fell back. The omega’s scent now more prominent with the open door. Obvious that she had been hiding in her room for the last few days. No doubt after it had happened.

Hiding away though meant she knew him. Barricading the door could mean he was close.

“I guess you haven’t worked since they happened,” Will spoke softly.

The omega backed away, tears in her eyes as she shook. Dave seemed to understand automatically and kept his distance.

“I don’t know what your talking about.” She answered, backing away.

There were no children in the room, no toys or clothing that would fit a child. A lie about her situation, a hope that it would allow her to have privacy and the seclusion from others she desired.

Instead, the coffee table was cluttered with an array of medications and illicit drugs. Likely used to help her cope, a reason she my have worked on the streets. Getting into strangers' cars to provide favors for money to fuel the habit she couldn’t kick.

“I don’t care about what you do, where you work.” Will held his hands up, fingers splayed to show no threat. “All I want is his name.”

Her eyes flashed.

“What kind of car does he drive then?” Will asked instead.

When her eyes looked up for a fraction of a second, so did Will. The ceiling above, the floor above them. “What number?”

The omega shook, tears falling down her cheeks as she placed her hands over her ears. “Get out!”

Will didn’t need to be told twice.

He walked out and shut the door, slowly looking up to the ceiling. “He’s here.”

“Didn’t take a genius to work that out,” Dave spoke, talking out his radio as he called for the uniformed officers who had been doing other areas to come to the apartment block they were at.

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“If it wasn’t for me, you wouldn’t have known he was here at all!”

Will gritted his teeth, trying not to raise his voice and make a scene. But it was difficult not to when he was watching the same uniformed officers go into the apartment complex to search for their killer.

The same officers who had given him such a hard time when he joined the force were now smiling because they got to do the *real* police work.

“I’m aware,” Dave responded, keeping his arms crossed. “But it’s not happening. I’m not putting you in danger.”

“And suddenly you’re afraid of my alpha?” Will teased with a glare. “You afraid of him coming to tear you apart. I assure you, he’s not that kind of alpha.”

“Either he loves you unconditionally or he doesn’t really care when he throws you in harms way.” Dave stood his ground.

Will weighed up the situation, reading Dave and seeing he wasn’t going to budge on his stance.

He resigned to his fate. Moving over to sit on the hood of the patrol car as he crossed his own arms. Then rested them on the hood as he thought he probably looked like a petulant child not getting his way.

From the distance he was able to watch the officers go in, the distant shouts of people who opened their doors. From outside, Will could track where they were, what floor they were on. Time ticked on as the kept going through each flor and checking each room.

The officers and other detectives knew they were looking for a beta male, one who would have fresh cuts on his hands and forearms. Possibly some bruising if their victim had put up a good fight. They hadn’t done the autopsy yet, hadn’t searched for DNA evidence under her finger nails.

A loud clang drew Will’s attention to the side of the building, a man jumping down the metal fire escape stairs as he started to runaway from the officers.

Without thinking, Will began to sprint towards him.

“Hey! Police! Stop!”

The man looked at him, stunned like a dear in headlights before he started to sprint down the stairs faster.

There was no hesitation as Will ran, getting to the bottom of the stairs before the man.

He paused for a moment on the last flight of stairs, then leapt over the railing and landed onto a dumpster as he rolled off onto the ground, standing to evaluate his position before he began to run again.

Will didn’t hesitate, sprinting after him. Closing the distance between them quickly as he then dived, colling into the man’s back. Knocking him to the ground. He caught his scent as he scrambled to get up. Eyes falling to the beta’s forearms to see the distinctive scratch marks.

“You’re under arrest, you have the right to remain silent, if-” Will had the breath knocked out of him as the beta elbowed him in the gut.

Falling back, Will caught the glint of a knife as the beta scrambled to his feet, opening his stance to try and appear more aggressive than he was.

Will got to his feet, baring his own teeth as the beta tried to snarl at him. Instead of trying to talk his way out, Will moved carefully, eyes following the beta man’s steps. Already kjnowing he was trying to position himself toward an exit to make a run.

But Will didn’t move around him, instead, taking a step to the side to block his exit.

“Get out of the way, omega.” The man tried to growl, but on a beta, it looked like a forced smile.

“You think I’m afraid of you?” Will smiled back as he tilted his head a fraction, watching it infuriate the man.

“You think you can take me?” The beta laughed before he then sneered.

“Don’t like it when they talk back?” Will smirked. “Bet your wife likes to tell you how useless you are.”

There was a twitch on the beta’s lips, knife raised. “I’m going to make a new hole for you, omega.”

“Don’t like it when they fight back?” Will spoke, knowingly. “Prefer easy targets because you can’t do it to the person you want to hurt the most.”

“You should be afraid of me.”

“Difficult when there’s nothing to fear about you.” Will spoke casually.

It did the trick Will was hoping for, spurring the beta to rush him. The instinct to fight, maim and kill. But it was obvious to read.

Lifting his arms, Will blocked the first swing, turning quickly to watch the man come back again.

The knife swung through the air as Will felt the beta collide with him.

A sharp searing pain on his alarm came as he hit the ground, the beta on top of him. Will rolled him over, then head butted him. Feeling the beta’s nose break and watching blood flow.

“Police!” “Police freeze!”

Will felt someone pulling him away, clutching at his arm as he felt his own blood against his hand.

“Got him.” Will smiled as Dave’s face came into view, feeling his skin tighten from the blood of the beta drying on his face.

Dave’s face was stricken, eyes falling to the cut on Will’s arm. “Shit.”

“It’s fine,” Will waved off. “It’s not that deep.”

“You’re still going to hospital. It needs stitches.” Dave spoke.

Will looked back, watching the beta being dragged up to a police car. Hands in cuffs. “Least you’ll be able to hold him on assault until you get the evidence needed for a murder charge.”

A camera clicked nearby, Will looked up, seeing a journalist who was taking more pics as Dave turned and stormed towards him yelling.

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“Your name?”

“Will Graham,”

“Will Graham-Lecter.” Dave supplied.

Will threw a glance at Dave.

“They need your full name for their records.” Dave spoke, shrugging at Will. “But he should be covered-”

“As he’s a cop. I know.” The nurse looked like she wanted to roll her eyes. But she started writing up paperwork. “What’s your current address?”

“Currently 113 Ascot Boulevard Baltimore. Room 509. But uh. We’re moving to 57 Goodwin Avenue in Baltimore.” Will licked his lips nervously as Dave raised his eyebrows. It made Will look down, knowing that the area was considered more for the upper class.

“I already have you here on file,” The nurse spoke, making Will look confused. “Come with me please.”

Will was escorted down the corridor, past patients that were waiting in line. The nurse stopped near the door, passing a note to a receptionist before opening a different set of doors and leading Will through.

“Just in here.”

The curtains were opened, a hospital bed down a lonely corridor. Will partly wondered if he had a semi private location due to being an omega.

“Can I get you a gown?” The nurse asked, closing the curtain as Will came in and sat on the edge bed.

“I’d prefer to just keep this on, thanks.” Will spoke quietly.

The nurse gave a shrug. “I’ll have a doctor come soon. They will want to check you for concussion.” She turned to look at Dave. “Are you going to be chaperone?”

“I don’t need a chaperone.” Will scowled.

“Until his mate is notified.” Dave gave a nod.

As the nurse left, she drew the curtains.

Will sat silently on the edge of the bed as Dave went to the sink, taking a handful of paper towels and wetting them. Coming back and handing them to him.

“Might wanna wipe that blood off your face before your alpha sees.”

“Thanks.” Will muttered.

“Pretty damn good head butt on that guy.” Dave smiled.

“You saw that?” Will threw the paper towels into the bin, looking at the gash on his arm. “Still got me though.”

“He didn’t expect an omega to fight, and you sure as hell put up a good one.” Dave laughed.

The conversation was cut when the curtain drew back.

“Will?”

Will looked up to see Hannibal walking in, he shut the curtain behind him, nostrils flaring as he scented the blood, a glance at the bin where the paper towels were. As he looked back, Will noted a hint of red in his eyes.

“Would you give us the room please,” Hannibal spoke, eyes focusing on Dave with no room for rebuttal.

Will felt his stomach drop. “I thought you were working in-”

“The receptionist phoned and told me what happened, I came right away,” Hannibal locked eyes on Will, his expression tense.

Hannibal never interrupted him, he would never do so in front of someone. For a moment, Will shot a look to Dave as he left. Concerned that he had annoyed Hannibal, that he had called him away from an important meeting for the trivial need of getting stitches in his arm because he had to chase the suspect down.

“Unconditionally.” Dave smiled as he left them alone.

The odd remark made Hannibal turn a fraction to look at Dave as his footsteps became silent. Then they were alone.

“I assume you caught your killer.” Hannibal hummed, moving closer as he gently picked up Will’s arm and looked at the wound.

“Yeah.” Will bit back a groan as Hannibal moved his wrist.

“It’s not broken, but likely strained.”

“I’m fine Hannibal, really,” Will spoke quickly.

"You've sustained a deep laceration to your arm," Hannibal said, his fingers deftly probing the wound with a precision born of years of surgical experience. "I need to suture it. Can you tell me the day and where we are?"

“Really?”

“Humour me.” Hannibal gave a tight smile.

“It’s Thursday and I’m in John Hopkins hospital, and you’re supposed to be in psychiatry today, not the ER.” Will smiled back, watching Hannibal relax a fraction.

“No concussion then.”

“Why would you think I have a concussion?” Will rolled his eyes.

“You headbutted a beta male with enough force to break his nose and you still have blood on your face.” Hannibal looked back, nostrils flaring again.

"You seem... annoyed," Will ventured, his voice low, almost hesitant.

Hannibal looked away. "No, Will. I am not annoyed."

It made Will sit up a little more, frowning as Hannibal went to get something out of a metal table. Undoing a sterile pack and laying what he needed on the tabletop.

"You don't have to pretend with me. I can tell." Will spoke weakly, watching as Hannibal prepared the instruments with meticulous care. Despite the pain, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Hannibal's movements were precise, but there was a tension in his posture, a tightness around his eyes that Will had never seen before.

Hannibal's eyes flickered to Will's, holding his gaze with an intensity that was both disconcerting and reassuring. "I am not annoyed, Will," he said softly. "I was... concerned."

The admission hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. Hannibal's hands continued their work, but there was a slight tremor in his usually steady fingers. Will's frown deepened, a mix of confusion and curiosity playing across his features.

"Concerned?" Will echoed, trying to decipher the layers beneath that simple word.

For a moment, there was only the sound of Hannibal's hands working, the rhythmic, almost hypnotic motion of the needle being threaded and anaesthetic being drawn up in a syringe.

When Hannibal finally spoke, his voice was softer, tinged with an emotion Will couldn't quite place. "Yes, concerned. When I heard you were injured, I something I have not felt in a long time… I feared for your life."

Will's breath caught in his throat. "Fear?" His voice barely above a whisper. "For me?"

Hannibal's eyes softened, the hard edges of his mask melting away to reveal a vulnerability that was both unexpected and profound.

"Yes, Will. For you. When I thought I might lose you... I was reminded of what it means to care for someone deeply."

Will sat quietly as Hannibal took the syringe, numbing the edges of the wound and then beginning to clean it.

"I have not felt such fear since I lost my own family."

On instinct, Will's hair on his arms began to stand. A frigid air passed over him as he looked at Hannibal. Eyes meeting.

When Hannibal returned from work he always sought him out. In bed, Hannibal always covered him when they were together, intimate or not. Hannibal was usually the one holding onto him.

On the paperwork Will had signed, Hannibal was a Count. Which meant naturally his father had passed and the title became Hannibal's. There had never been a discussion about Hannibal's family, his parents, or any siblings. No other on the bond certificate Will had signed.

His care for detail signalled a younger sibling. A sister Will's mind naturally made the connection.

The kitchen had always been stocked and Hannibal knew how to cook well, meals were always prepared, the fridge full, and nothing left to chance.

"How old were you when you lost your family?" Will blurted out, eyes already brimming with tears.

"Young enough to understand what happened."

Will felt his breath catch, a pain in Hannibal's eyes that was blinked away. Something distant replacing it. "You saw what happened,"

Hannibal's chin cocked sideways like he'd been dealt a blow. "My father tried to shield us, holding them off for as long as possible. My mother hid us in the wardrobe."

Not an only child.

Protective nature would mean a younger sibling, the small traits Hannibal had with plating things and making them beautiful like he had done years before for a sister.

"You had a sister." Will breathed, already seeing it so well. "She was younger than you."

"Mischa."

Will had never heard Hannibal's voice break, but it wavered.

Whatever happened, Will could already feel it. That Hannibal had tried to protect her, he knew she had not made it. He'd seen no other names upon the legal documents he'd signed,

never a mention of any of Hannibal’s family apart from his uncle who had died and an aunt he was estranged from.

Hannibal was just alone in the world as Will was himself.

“She was not my child, but she was my charge,” Hannibal answered Will’s unanswered question. A tear formed in his eye.

“I could not protect her when she needed it the most.” Hannibal took a moment, gathering himself as he relaxed suddenly. “But I ensured she would always be a part of me... In other ways.”

Will let the silence stretch between them, understanding Hannibal would not give out more.

"I'm sorry," Will said finally, his voice thick with emotion. "I didn't mean to worry you."

Hannibal shook his head gently. "There's nothing to be sorry for, Will. Just promise me you'll be more careful."

Will managed a weak smile. "I promise."

Hannibal started to stitch the clean wound, meticulous about each knot, care to ensure there was minimal scarring. A dressing was fixed over the top before Hannibal moved away and started to clean up.

Sitting quietly, Will watched Hannibal move with ease around the room. Understanding then why Hannibal came down himself and stitched the wound.

While most hospitals would not allow a doctor to look after their partner, it was different with bonded mates. Hannibal needed to address the wound and ensure Will was safe. That there was no lasting damage.

The tension in Hasnnibal’s shoulders seemed to ease, replaced by a quiet relief. For the first time, Will saw the depth of Hannibal's concern for him, a concern that hinted at something more profound.

In the sterile, clinical confines of the hospital room, amidst the lingering scent of antiseptic and the steady hum of medical equipment, an unspoken understanding passed between them. Hannibal's fear had been real, and so was his care for Will—a realization that would forever alter the fabric of their bond.

Will stood, coming to kiss Hannibal softly. “Thank you.”

For a while Will had thought in time their bond would dissolve and Hannibal would move on. Part of him had been accepting of that, thankful that the alpha had kept his end of the promise and allowed him to do what he wanted with his life. That he had set up

But in essence, Hannibal cared for him.

Hannibal's eyes met Will's, and for a moment, the facade of the unflappable doctor fell away, revealing the wounded soul beneath. "You are one of the few people I would trust with such a memory, Will."

“At least you have me now to make new memories.” Will smiled.

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The fountain pen was poised over the paper, like a dying man at the gallows waiting to be cut free to fall to the ground.

Hannibal didn’t press it down though, letting it hang as he felt lost for words. Silence engulfed him like a wet cold blanket, feeling like a child left alone in the woods.

After all these years, he never expected to talk to his aunt again. Let alone invite her to meet his mate.

Murasaki would see through the charade of the party, to know that all pretenses aside, it was a show that Hannibal was capable of love. Her last words to him had always been written upon his heart.

“What is left of you to love?”

Eyes close as Hannibal savors Will scent that clings to his shirt, the way his heart is able to skip a beat and change its rhythm when nothing else ever comes close.

Will provides him with an experience no one else has ever come close to. Not even his aunt. The only one Hannibal truly believes in making him feel capable of a similar emotion held his heart frozen in the ice for years until Will thawed it out and handed it back to him, warm and beating.

Hannibal places the pen on the paper. Ink blooms under gentle pressure, his cursive flowing freely as his invitation grows longer. Heart beating in time as he writes and wishes his aunt Murasaki could see the music Will produces from him, the way his words become more electrifying.

Taking out an envelope, Hannibal opens it, folding the invitation perfectly, and places it inside before he lifts it to his lips, tongue darting out to wet the dried glue. Bitterness blooms on his tastebuds as he presses the envelope closed and feels the last pieces of love he held for Murasaki leave him.

The ornate silver box that has sat on his desk for years is finally opened, the familiar scent of perfume just reaches his nose before it fades entirely.

A small hand reaches in, taking the family crest and a wax stick. Golden hair catches in the light as Hannibal blinks and the image fades. The seal sitting there, waiting.

It’s taken, wax heated till it drips onto the back of the envelope and Hannibal pushes in the seal, watching the family crest being indented upon the wax. As beautiful and vibrant as arterial blood.

It’s placed into the pile of invitations to be sent, the only one with the seal upon it. The seal is placed back into the silver box to await another day to be used. When it will be opened again would likely be to announce Murasaki’s death.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The scent of coffee wafted steadily from the fresh mug in Hannibal's hand, sitting at the kitchen bench as he read the front page of the newspaper that had been delivered.

Will was on the cover, along with Dave the detective whom Hannibal had met at the hospital.

Their killer in handcuffs, throwing a disgruntled glance at Will with his broken nose.

Blood still adorned Will's face in the photo, smeared on his cheek and lip. His eyes looking down away from the camera, yet Hannibal wanted nothing more than to see what Will looked like in color.

The black and white photo did no justice for his omega.

Still, Hannibal felt proud. Will had caught this killer, and fought valiantly to catch him. The article painted Will in a heroic light, that his training had enabled him to catch the killer and that Will didn't stop at anything till the beta man was off the streets.

"God, I look terrible!"

"You look ravishing, darling," Hannibal spoke, looking over the top of the paper, watching Will walk in to claim the coffee that was waiting for him.

"I still had his blood all over me," Will grunted, dropping a teaspoon of sugar into his mug and stirring. The metal spoon clicking against the sides, Will utilizing the sharp sound to try and wash away the conversation.

"Millennia ago, our ancestors painted their faces with the blood of their enemies as a symbol of victory and a means to instill fear, serving as a stern warning to others," Hannibal spoke, turning to watch Will sip at his coffee, trying to picture the red vibrant hues upon his face. Part of him mourned the fact he'd missed it when stitching Will's wound. That Will had wiped it away.

"Today, while we have evolved beyond such practices, the essence of our desire to assert strength and discourage conflict remains a part of our shared history."

"Omegas used to hunt and kill alphas not for mating with them." Will shrugged. "Now most omega falls to their knees if their alpha is displeased."

Hannibal hummed, amused by the idea. "I have not witnessed you falling to your knees due to my displeasure."

Will bit his lip. A light smirk. "I considered it briefly in the hospital."

The very idea sent a shiver of pleasure up Hannibal's spine, Will on his knees, the beta male's blood still on his face as Hannibal knotted his mouth. His seed leak down Will's chin, turning pink as it mixed with the blood. All the while, Will in a state of content while he pleasured his knot.

"Would you care to elaborate on this fantasy?" Hannibal intoned therapeutically.

"No," Will laughed as he came to lean against the counter. "Besides, isn't it inappropriate to psychoanalyze your mate?"

"If you were a patient," Hannibal murmured as he sipped his own coffee again. "I was simply asking as your concerned alpha."

"I'll remember that for when I do something I shouldn't and I have to seek forgiveness." Will smiled wickedly.

Hannibal memorized the dark glint in Will's eyes, the way he licked his bottom lip before biting it and hoped that the day would come soon. "Better to seek forgiveness than ask permission."

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The Rolodex lay open on the kitchen counter, its sleek, elegant cylinder containing an array of business cards. Each card represented a person whom Hannibal found rude. Individuals he had decided to remove from the world.

They were stored methodically, ready to be picked and chosen at his discretion. An array of meat and offal yet to be stored in his fridge.

Three cards were carefully laid out on the counter as Hannibal pondered the elements needed for his upcoming feast. He was planning a dinner for a dozen guests, each course meticulously curated: an entrée, a main, and a dessert. The menu would be simple yet elegant, showcasing his culinary prowess.

One rule was non-negotiable.

Nothing would be vegetarian.

Hannibal opened another box on the counter, revealing a collection of recipe cards.

His own creations from his travels. He flicked through them, savoring the memories each one invoked.

The beef cheeks of the swine who'd murdered Mischa.

Oyster blade steak from the pig who'd cooked and prepped her.

Marrow bones from the pork that had held the spoon to Hannibal's lips.

Pausing, Hannibal glanced at the business cards he had selected.

Most were recent additions to his collection. He thought back to the week before he met Will, to the alpha who had come in with a hunting accident to the ER. The alpha's rudeness had been matched only by his beta friend's demands.

Hannibal had done a favor for Donald Sutcliffe, treating them both with care despite their abrasive manners.

In a small town like Baltimore, everyone was interconnected.

If anyone ever looked into the books, he was technically logged out of work. The only information that would give him away is the medical records which would never be pulled as they were confidential.

Hannibal smiled to himself, recalling the alpha's personal details with precision: his address, his truck—he had seen them leave in it as he departed the hospital.

It was one dish completed.

Another dish was already waiting in his new extended basement.

The promise of cash had enticed a man to complete some illegal work for Hannibal within a short time frame. Unfortunately for him, he hadn't lived to enjoy the money. Estranged from his wife and without children or close family, his disappearance went unnoticed. He had been rude, an easy target, and Hannibal had ensured no one would miss him. Along with no one knowing of the basement extension he had created.

Now, only one more ingredient was needed. Hannibal decided he would find someone during his next journey home from the hospital. A random encounter, someone with no ties to him, it would make it harder to trace. That along with the person being left alive until he needed the meat. The night before the dinner party would be the perfect time to strike.

Baltimore was full of rude individuals, and a little cleaning of the streets was always welcome.

Hannibal closed the Rolodex with a satisfied smile, anticipating the upcoming feast. His meticulous nature and attention to detail ensured that every element would be perfect, from the preparation to the final presentation.

The evening promised to be an unforgettable experience for his guests, even if they never knew the true nature of the meat.

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Will glanced around the kitchen, noting the subtle changes that had been made recently.

Stainless steel appliances gleamed under the soft lighting, and the scent of fresh paint lingered in the air. He walked through to the dining room, where he found Hannibal in deep discussion with a group of electricians, plumbers, and painters.

Hannibal, ever the perfectionist, was detailing his vision for the space. "I want a herb garden on the wall," he explained to them, the blank wall before them no doubt already constructed in Hannibal's mind.

Will couldn't help but think the idea was slightly ridiculous. Yet, he knew Hannibal's passion for cooking demanded nothing but the best ingredients and fresh herbs/ They were a crucial component of his culinary creations. Will had seen the grocery receipts, often gawking at the exorbitant prices of specialty items Hannibal insisted on.

The doorbell rang, interrupting his thoughts. Will left Hannibal to his detailed instructions and artistic visions and headed to the front door.

A delivery man was unloading boxes onto the concrete steps. A folder in his hand as he looked up.

"Do you need me to sign?" Will asked, already knowing it was probably additional furniture for the house Hannibal had bought.

"I haven't finished unloading yet," the man sighed. "This is the Lecter house?"

"Hannibal Lecter, yes," Will confirmed.

"I have paperwork for Will and Hannibal Lecter."

Will's curiosity piqued. "Who is the delivery from?"

"Oswald and Sons Tailoring. Would you prefer that I bring them inside?" The man began stacking the boxes on a trolley.

"Inside would be ideal, on the third floor, please," Hannibal interjected as he approached. "I ordered a few things from the tailor. I was expecting this tomorrow, but it seems they've arrived early."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Several boxes of clothing?"

"Actually, it's the entire small truck," the delivery man clarified, pushing the loaded trolley toward the house.

Hannibal pulled out his wallet and handed the man cash. "I apologize for the inconvenience, but I would prefer the boxes be carried. Hopefully, this will cover your trouble."

The delivery man's eyes widened slightly at the generous tip. "Thank you, sir. I'll get started right away."

As the delivery man began the laborious task of transporting the boxes, Will turned to Hannibal. "Why so many clothes?"

Hannibal's lips curved into a small, enigmatic smile. "Appearances matter, Will. And I intend for us to present ourselves impeccably."

Will shook his head, bemused by Hannibal's meticulous nature. As the workers bustled around them, he couldn't help but feel a strange sense of contentment. Despite the chaos, there was something comforting about Hannibal's unwavering attention to detail and his desire to create a perfect home.

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Hannibal stood in the doorway of their newly renovated kitchen, his keen eyes observing Will with a mixture of admiration and curiosity. The kitchen was a blend of modern efficiency and rustic charm, a perfect reflection of their unique relationship. The scent of oak filled the room, mingling with the faint aroma of herbs that now grew on the dining room wall.

Will was focused on his task, meticulously working on a kitchen island. Each movement was deliberate, reflecting Will's desire to create something perfect for Hannibal.

The oak was the statement piece. Hannibal only knew it was from his homeland when it had been carried into the kitchen and unboxed, Will giving him a gentle smile as he ran his hands over it.

Will had spent weeks planning this project, pouring over blueprints and sourcing the finest materials. The oak had been a particularly important choice. He knew Lithuania held a special place in Hannibal's heart, and he wanted this island to be a reminder of home, a piece of Hannibal's past integrated into their shared future.

"I wanted you to have something from home here, something that you could build upon." Will had smiled. "What better than an island for you to cook on?"

Hannibal hadn't said a thing, not wanting to inform Will of what had happened to Mischa. What he had done to survive. He had made it a part of him, one that Will understood with his cooking skills and decided to give back on. Unwittingly not knowing what he was giving.

Hannibal watched as Will sanded the wood, smoothing its surface with careful precision. How his hands moved over it, testing the smoothness, feeling for rough edges. He wished for Will's scent to be captured in the island when it was lacquered. Perhaps even a stray curl.

There was something mesmerizing about the way Will worked, his dedication and craftsmanship evident in every stroke. Hannibal felt a swell of emotion, a rare softness that he seldom allowed himself to experience.

As the island began to take shape, Will paused to wipe the sweat from his brow. He glanced up and caught Hannibal's gaze, a shy smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "I hope you like it," he said, his voice tinged with uncertainty. "I wanted it to be something special."

Hannibal stepped forward, his fingers brushing lightly over the polished oak on the corner. The test piece to see how it stood out in the kitchen. "It's beautiful, Will," he replied, his voice warm and sincere. "You've done an extraordinary job."

Will's smile widened, a mix of relief and pride in his eyes. "I wanted it to feel like home," he admitted. "I used to watch TV commercials and see people eating on an island countertop."

Hannibal's expression softened further. He reached out and gently took Will's hand, squeezing it affectionately. "You have succeeded, darling. This island will be the heart of our kitchen." Already planning on how to prepare the heart tartare for their dinner party.

"I didn't think you would pull off that herb garden wall." Will laughed softly. "But you did."

Will resumed his work, and Hannibal continued to watch.

"If there's one thing I've learned, it's that I will always find a way to accomplish what I set my mind to. No matter the challenge, there is always a solution." Hannibal's eyes glinted with a hint of mischief as he looked at Will

"If you didn't have that spirit, we would have never met." Will bit his bottom lip.

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It had been a rush home from the station, and Will felt a familiar knot of anxiety tightening in his stomach.

He knew he had plenty of time to get ready, yet his nerves were on edge about the evening ahead.

This was not just any dinner party; it was the first one he and Hannibal were hosting as a bonded couple, a fact that added a layer of significance and pressure to the occasion.

As he stepped into the foyer, Will couldn't help but marvel at the transformation of their home.

Hannibal had orchestrated a complete renovation of the downstairs, turning the space into an elegant setting worthy of a magazine spread. Money was no object, and Hannibal had employed a team of skilled contractors to bring his vision to life.

The thought of the likely astronomical bill made Will shudder slightly, though he knew better than to question Hannibal's decisions when it came to matters of taste and aesthetics.

Will smiled as he spotted Hannibal in the kitchen, orchestrating the preparations with the calm precision of a maestro conducting an orchestra. The staff moved around him, assisting in the final touches for the dinner party.

It was something Will had not argued against; it allowed Hannibal to host seamlessly, and Will could fall into the background, letting Hannibal navigate the conversations and social intricacies that were sure to arise. All the while, food being served and glasses being filled by skilled waitstaff who knew how to take care of the guests at their table.

For a moment, Hannibal looked up from his work, the briefest smile as he let his gaze bore into Will's own, then a nod to the staircase. A silent gesture to 'go change' that Will knew was coming.

Will hurried up the stairs to their bedroom. As he entered, he noticed the suit laid out on the bed, complete with shoes, socks, and an embroidered collar. Will moved closer, admiring the collar's craftsmanship. The fabric was finely stitched, featuring sharp, vibrant shades of red and blue.

"You'll find that they match," came Hannibal's soft voice from the doorway. Will turned to see him standing there, a faint smile playing on his lips as he crossed the room to Will. Hannibal leaned in, inhaling Will's scent, intimate, yet reassuring.

"Match with what?" Will asked, laughing gently as he reached out to pull Hannibal forward.

Hannibal stepped back, revealing his own attire. The tie he wore was a perfect match to the colors in Will's collar, as was the handkerchief tucked neatly into his pocket. "My tie," Hannibal replied with a knowing smile.

Will chuckled, touched by the attention to detail. "Do you always plan things so everyone will know we're bonded?" he asked quietly, smiling despite the faint unease he felt about fitting in with the sophisticated guests Hannibal had invited.

"Always," Hannibal said, pulling Will closer for another kiss, his lips lingering as if savoring the moment. "But you should start getting ready. Our guests will be arriving in an hour."

Will nodded, stealing a kiss before heading into the shower. As he prepared, he noticed a new array of grooming products neatly arranged on the bathroom counter, no doubt another of Hannibal's thoughtful touches. He couldn't help but smile at the array, knowing Hannibal had likely selected each item with care.

As the warm water cascaded over him, Will let his thoughts wander. There was something about this night that felt different. Perhaps it was the way Hannibal had arranged every detail, or maybe it was how Hannibal wouldn't allow him into the kitchen when he was preparing the meals. Insisting he go to work while he spent the day cooking and cleaning before the staff even arrived.

After dressing, Will stood in front of the mirror, adjusting the collar and smoothing out any wrinkles in the suit. He glanced at his reflection, feeling a mix of pride and trepidation. The suit fit him perfectly, and the matching details with Hannibal's attire gave him a sense of belonging, a visible symbol of their partnership.

Descending the stairs, Will felt a surge of confidence. He found Hannibal waiting for him in the foyer, looking as impeccably composed as ever. Hannibal's eyes lit up with approval as he took in Will's appearance.

"You look stunning," Hannibal murmured, taking Will's hand and pressing a kiss to his knuckles. "Shall we greet our guests?"

Will nodded, his nerves settling into a calm resolve.

The elegant townhouse was beautifully decorated, a reflection of Hannibal's refined taste. The dining room, adorned with candles and fresh flowers, was set for an intimate dinner

party.

Will admired the work Hannibal had done, fingers running over the flowers on the table, seeing how they worked well with the cobalt blue wall and the fireplace.

As the clock struck seven, the first guests began to arrive.

Will stood by Hannibal's side at the door, greeting each guest. Hannibal spoke first, Will following after. It made it easier given Hannibal knew every name. Beginning a conversation before directing them further into the house.

As the second last guest arrived, Hannibal rolled his shoulders. To anyone else, it would mean nothing, but Will felt the tension.

"What's wrong?" Will leaned it, pretending to fiddle with Hannibal's tie. Fingers on it as their eyes met.

"I had invited someone special, it is not like her to be late," Hannibal spoke with a glance out the door.

Will tried to think of something, an excuse. "Perhaps she's caught in traffic."

"Perhaps." Hannibal hummed, not believing the words. "Would you care to ensure that all the guests have their seats while I check on the kitchen?"

Will gave a nod, heading into the dining room when a knock came at the door.

A look back to Hannibal, the alpha standing perfectly still, except for the twitch in his fingers. Will came back, holding Hannibal's hand as he opened the door.

"Lady Murasaki, it's a pleasure to see you," Hannibal spoke. "This is my mate, Will Lecter."

Will bowed his head, eyes catching the collar upon Lady Murasaki's neck. Her eyes met his own, he felt the same intensity of her gaze as Hannibal's held at times. "Lady Murasaki. Thank you for coming."

"It is difficult not to accept when you took care of all the arrangements," Lady Murasaki spoke to Hannibal, then looked Will up and down. "You must have something special if you caught Hannibal's eye."

Will gave a strained smile, knowing the remark was not a compliment. Lady Murasaki was wary of him. Despite only just meeting.

"Please, come in." Hannibal took Lady Murasaki's coat, hanging it. When he offered his hand to walk her to the dining room she refused and walked ahead of him.

It was odd, more so that Hannibal was not offended by it, but Hannibal said nothing as he followed. Will fell into the rhythm.

Instead of allowing Hannibal to pull the chair out, Will dashed ahead, doing the action for Lady Murasaki.

She paused, a glance to Will, a tilt of her head Will so often saw in Hannibal before she took the seat elegantly and spoke a quiet “thank you.”.

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“Before we begin,” Hannibal stood, glass raised in toast. “Nothing here is vegetarian.”

There was applause with joyous laughter as the first course was served.

Hannibal watched the plates settle in front of the guests, the murmur of excitement. Many took their knife and fork in hand. The scrape of cutlery against fine china, appreciative hums filling the room with the first bites.

Even Will ate with enthusiasm, nerves forgotten for the moment.

The only person who did not touch their plate was Lady Murasaki. She sat quietly at the other end of the table, her meal growing cold as she locked eyes with him.

“You must try the meat.” Mrs Komeda smiled, raising her glass in toast to Hannibal. “It is simply divine.”

“I’m afraid it’s too cruel.” Lady Murasaki bowed her head before her eyes pierced Hannibal’s own.

Hannibal's smile widened, though there was an edge to it, almost predatory. “Cruelty is relative, Lady Murasaki. What is cruel to one may be an art form to another.” His voice was smooth, the words slipping from his lips like silk, but there was an unmistakable tension in the room now, a subtle shift in the atmosphere as she tensed in her posture.

Mrs. Komeda's laughter rang out, light and carefree, a stark contrast to the weight of the conversation. “Ah, but that's the beauty of it, isn't it? The complexity of taste, the emotions it evokes. It’s all part of the experience.”

Will’s fork hesitated mid-air, his eyes flickering between Lady Murasaki and Hannibal. He sensed the undercurrent of something deeper, a battle of wills playing out in silence. He wasn’t sure where he stood in this moment—caught between his own curiosity and the nagging suspicion that something more was at stake.

Lady Murasaki remained composed, her gaze unyielding. “There is no beauty in needless suffering, Hannibal. The world has enough darkness without us adding to it.”

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, regarding her with a mixture of respect and amusement. “Darkness is an essential part of the human condition, Lady Murasaki. To deny it is to deny our very nature. But,” he raised his glass once more, “I believe it is within our power to shape that darkness, to give it form and purpose. Wouldn’t you agree?”

There was a murmur within the room, a faint clinking of glasses as the guests sipped their wine and smiled behind their glasses. Lady Murasaki did not answer immediately. Instead, she slowly reached for her knife and fork, lifting them with grace. The room seemed to hold its breath as she delicately picked up a piece of the meat, examining it with an unreadable expression.

Without breaking eye contact with Hannibal, she placed the morsel in her mouth, chewing slowly. The tension in the room was palpable, every eye on her as she swallowed.

“Your cooking is exquisite, Hannibal,” she finally said, her voice soft but firm. “But I cannot help but wonder—at what cost?”. There was a flicker of something in her eyes—approval of the taste, but revulsion at the cost of it. The unknown cost to the other guests. The secret of the butcher who sourced the meat.

Hannibal’s smile remained, though it was hollow. A farce for those in the room, one Lady Murdasaki could see straight through. “Every masterpiece requires sacrifice. The question is, who is willing to pay the price?”

She set down her knife and fork, her expression serene. “And who are you to decide what that price should be?”

Hannibal leaned back in his chair, still holding her gaze. “I am merely a humble chef, serving a meal. The decision, Lady Murasaki, is entirely up to you.”

Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his earlier enthusiasm for the meal now overshadowed by the weight of the conversation. The other guests exchanged uneasy glances, uncertain of how to proceed.

Lady Murasaki offered a small, enigmatic smile. “Then I choose to savor only the flavors that do not stain the soul.” She pushed her plate away, signaling her refusal.

Hannibal inclined his head, acknowledging her choice with a grace that belied the intensity of their exchange. “A wise decision, Lady Murasaki. But remember, not all darkness is born from cruelty. Sometimes, it is simply...inevitable.”

“Then I feel I must decline.” Lady Murasaki gently pushed the plate from her, taking the napkin off her lap as she stood elegantly.

“Please excuse us,” Hannibal gave a polite smile, standing to accompany Lady Murasaki.

Lady Murasaki moved with the grace of a dancer as she left the table, Hannibal following closely behind her. The murmurs of the remaining guests filled the air, a mix of curiosity and discomfort.

Will's gaze lingered on Hannibal, catching the subtle exchange of a silent message—an unspoken request for him to stay behind.

In the privacy of Hannibal’s study, Lady Murasaki paused, turning to face him as the door clicked shut behind them. Her expression was unreadable, a calm mask that betrayed nothing

of the turmoil that might have been swirling beneath the surface.

“You didn’t have to follow me, Hannibal,” she said softly, her voice carrying the gentleness of a warning.

“And yet, here I am,” he replied, his tone light, almost playful, though his eyes were sharp, studying her with the same intensity as he would an intricate work of art. “Walking out was never an option for you.”

She took a step closer, her gaze unwavering. “You enjoy these games, don’t you? Testing boundaries, seeing how far you can push before something breaks.”

Hannibal’s smile was subtle, almost imperceptible. “I believe in understanding the limits of human nature, Lady Murasaki. How else can we truly know ourselves if we don’t explore the edges of our own morality?”

“Perhaps,” she conceded, “but there is a difference between exploration and exploitation. Not everyone is willing to play by your rules.”

Hannibal’s gaze softened, a flicker of something genuine crossing his face. “You’ve always seen more than others, haven’t you? That’s what I’ve always admired about you.”

Lady Murasaki held his gaze, the tension between them a delicate balance of trust and distrust, respect and defiance. “I know what you are, Hannibal. And I know that you walk a path few dare to tread. But I won’t be a pawn in your game. The way you have made Chiyoh a prisoner in your home.”

“Chiyoh chose her own path, her prison is of her own making.” Hannibal tilted his head. “You still do not believe what happened.”

“It is difficult to believe when you put on such ostentatious display while serving ‘pork’.” Lady Murasaki bowed her head a fraction.

He inclined his head in acknowledgment, the playful edge to his demeanor fading. “I never intended for you to be a pawn, my dear Lady Murasaki. You ***were*** far more than that.”

A moment of silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken words. Finally, she spoke, her voice tinged with a quiet resolve. Lady Murasaki's gaze remained steady as she addressed Hannibal, her voice calm but edged with warning. "You place your pieces with precision, Hannibal, always seeing the board several moves ahead. But remember, even the most cunning player must be careful not to underestimate the cost of losing the queen. A game won at such a price may not be a victory worth savoring."

Hannibal's voice was smooth, almost reverent, as he spoke. "Our game has come to its natural conclusion, Lady Murasaki. But as with all things, endings are merely transitions. I have a new chessboard now, a new set of pieces to arrange, to test, to master. The old game was instructive, but this new one promises even greater rewards." His eyes gleamed with the thrill of the challenge, the anticipation of what was to come.

Lady Murasaki paused, letting his words sink in, her gaze never wavering from hers. "But every game needs a worthy opponent, someone who can understand the nuances, the deeper layers of strategy. It’s not enough to simply play—I seek someone who can elevate the game to its highest form."

Lady Murasaki studied him, her expression unreadable. She knew Hannibal's mind, his insatiable need for intellectual stimulation, for the constant push and pull of competition. He thrived on these games, not merely for the victory, but for the dance, the intricate steps that brought him closer to his own truths.

"You speak of a new board, Hannibal, as if the past can be so easily discarded," she replied, her voice measured, each word carefully chosen. "But even in a new game, the echoes of the old remain. The pieces may change, the board may look different, but the essence of the game, the players themselves—those remain constant."

She took a step closer, her eyes piercing through his calm exterior. "You may believe you’ve moved on to something greater, something more challenging, but do not forget that every game has its consequences. The past is not so easily left behind, and the pieces you’ve sacrificed will not remain silent. They linger, Hannibal, in the shadows of your new board, reminding you that even the most brilliant of strategies can have a cost."

Hannibal's smile was slight, a mere flicker at the corner of his lips. "True, the past is a shadow that follows us. But it is also a foundation, Lady Murasaki. Each move, each sacrifice, builds upon the last, creating something more intricate, more profound. I do not discard the old game—I evolve from it."

Lady Murasaki held his gaze, the air between them thick with the unspoken understanding of what lay beneath his words. "Just be sure, Hannibal, that in your pursuit of this evolution, you do not lose sight of the value of the pieces you hold. For in the end, it is not the game that defines us, but the choices we make within it."

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, a gesture of acknowledgment, though the flicker in his eyes suggested that he was already looking ahead, already envisioning the next move, the next twist in his carefully crafted game. But in that moment, there was also a recognition, a rare admission that Lady Murasaki was not just a piece on the board—she was a player in her own right, one whose moves could alter the course of the game in ways even he could not fully predict.

Hannibal watched as Lady Murasaki took a step closer, her presence commanding. “You’ve woven a veil around yourself, Hannibal, twisting it to fit among those you deem worthy of your intellect. But beneath that veil, you are nothing more than a black hole—a void, consuming everything that dares to come too close, leaving only emptiness in your wake.”

With that, she turned and left the room, leaving Hannibal alone in the dim light of his study. He watched her go, his expression unreadable, a mixture of contemplation and something darker.

As the door closed behind her, Hannibal remained still, his thoughts a labyrinth of possibilities. Lady Murasaki had always been a formidable presence in his life, a mirror

reflecting his own complexities back at him. She was someone who understood the darkness, perhaps even shared it to some extent, but she had never allowed herself to be consumed by it.

Hannibal took a minute and heard the front door close. Lady Murasaki's perfume lingered in the air, where he might have stood before and spent more time capturing every note, determined to capture it in his memory palace, his mind shifted to Will. Memories of his omega's scent, how he selected cologne to highlight it, shampoo and conditioner to nurture it. How the faint traces still lingered on his own clothing now and dimmed Lady Murasaki's.

Coming back to the dinning room, Will was leaning in slightly, a genuine smile on his lips as he talked with Elanor Komeda. They both glanced up at him as he took his seat again.

"My apologies, but Lady Murasaki had urgent business and had to depart." Hannibal gave a polite smile.

Will leaned over, hand taking Hannibal's under the table and squeezing, eyes lighting up as Elanor smiled a little wider. "We shouldn't let one guest dim the evening. This dinner has been delightful. I'm rather looking forward to the next invite."

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As the guests began to depart, Will assisted, ensuring all of them were ushered out. Coats were collected, Hannibal helping a few into them as Elanor Komeda spoke graciously about the evening.

Hannibal had gone to ensure most of the kitchen was tidied. The wait staff paid and praised for their efforts.

When the knock came on the front door, Will was surprised.

"Lady Murasaki?" Will spoke as he held the door open.

"Forgive my intrusion, but I forgot my coat." Lady Murasaki spoke, stepping quietly into the foyer, eyes glancing around.

The coat was hanging on the rack, delicate fingers picked it up, opening it.

Will moved to assist but Lady Murasaki stepped aside, sliding her arms into the coat and pulling the collar up to cover her own.

Lady Murasaki's eyes softened as she looked at him. "Be careful, Will Graham," she said, her voice carrying a weight of caution. Her eyes darted to Will's collar. "The line between hunter and prey is often thinner than we realize. Sometimes, we find ourselves imprisoned by the choices we've made, only realizing too late what we have agreed to."

Will met her gaze, the warning in her words sinking into the depths of his consciousness. He felt the weight of them, the truth she was trying to impart. For a moment, he saw a flicker of something in her eyes—concern, perhaps, or a recognition of the struggle within him.

“Good bye, Lady Murasaki,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. He wasn’t sure what else to say, didn’t truly understand her words of caution.

Lady Murasaki inclined her head gracefully. “Good bye, Will Graham. Just remember, not all battles are won by force. Some are won by knowing when to walk away.”

With that, she turned and made her way toward the exit, her movements as elegant as ever.

As she walked away, Will glanced back at Hannibal, who was watching them with an inscrutable expression.

Then Will watched her walk down the path beyond the house, the echo of her words lingering in his mind as the door stood open. Trying to rationalize what her words of caution were for.

Then again, he had met a few betas, omegas and alphas who tried to caution him away from working in the police force.

Chapter End Notes

all mistakes are my own, maybe one day I will actually do a beta/alpha reader and an entire story before posting! one day....

Chapter 8

Will sat at the island counter in the kitchen, mind humming softly from the sweet wine and noise of the dinner party.

Fingers ran over the finished oak of the island, appreciating the color and shine it held in the light with the lacquered finish.

“You were magnificent, darling,” Hannibal spoke softly, coming behind to kiss the nape of Will's neck.

“Everyone seemed pleased. Your cooking was exceptional as always," Will replied, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He tilted his head slightly, giving Hannibal better access to his neck, feeling the warmth of breath against his skin. Hannibal’s scent invading his senses as he leaned back for more. "You outdid yourself tonight."

Hannibal's hands slid down Will's shoulders, resting just above his elbows. "And you were the perfect host," he murmured. "Charming, engaging... It's as if you've always belonged in this world."

Will chuckled softly, the sound vibrating through his chest. "A world of refinement and taste, you mean?"

It was easy to allow himself to slide into Hannibal’s shoes, copying his traits and mannerisms while adding his own dazzling smile. People had appreciated him because of Hannibal’s money and growing connections to Baltimore. Intricately weaved and invisible to the untrained eye.

It was as if invisible fishing lines threaded through their very flesh, each one anchored to Hannibal’s fingertips. With a subtle pull, he could make them dance to his whims, their movements dictated not by their own will, but by the promise of the rewards Hannibal held just out of reach.

Now the same fingers gently traced patterns along Will's arms, his touch lingering with a deliberate slowness. "A world where you can be appreciated for the man you truly are, without pretense."

Will's smile faded slightly as he considered Hannibal's words. "Sometimes I wonder if this world is meant for me, or if it's just a mask I wear."

Hannibal turned Will to face him, his expression serious yet tender. "The only mask you wear is the one you think the world demands. Here, with me, you can be yourself. No masks, no walls, no boundaries."

For a moment, Hannibal came closer, lips curving up in a subtle smile before he pulled away. Hannibal moved with his usual grace, retrieving a bottle of rich red wine. He poured it into a glass, the deep crimson liquid catching the light as it swirled in the crystal. He then handed the glass to Will, their fingers brushing in the exchange.

"Something to relax you further," Hannibal murmured, his voice low and smooth.

Will accepted the glass, taking a slow sip, savoring the flavor that lingered on his tongue. The wine was exquisite, like everything Hannibal chose—a perfect blend of depth and warmth. "Do you intend to peel the mask from me?"

Hannibal's lips curved into a knowing smile as he watched Will take another sip of the wine. "Perhaps," he replied, his voice almost a purr. "Or perhaps I intend to reveal what lies beneath, a truth even you might not yet fully understand."

Will met Hannibal's gaze, a flicker of curiosity and apprehension in his eyes. "And what truth is that?"

Hannibal stepped closer, his hand brushing lightly against Will's cheek before tracing a path down his jawline. "The truth of who you are when all the layers are stripped away," he said softly, his words laced with a seductive certainty. "A man of extraordinary complexity, passion, and... much more to come."

Will felt a shiver run through him, the intensity in Hannibal's eyes holding him captive. "You think you know me that well?"

Hannibal leaned in, his lips grazing the edge of Will's ear as he whispered, "I intend to cherish every part of you. To know all of your secrets, even the parts you don't fully understand yourself yet."

Will's breath caught in his throat, the closeness of Hannibal, the warmth of his breath, the weight of it intoxicating, like the wine he was still holding. He set the glass down, freeing his hands to rest on Hannibal's chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath his fingertips.

"And what if I don't want to see what's beneath?" Will asked, his voice a mix of challenge and vulnerability.

Hannibal pulled back just enough to look into Will's eyes, his expression tender. "Then I'll guide you," he said, his hand sliding to the back of Will's neck, holding him gently, but not allowing Will to move if he wanted to. "I'll be with you every step of the way. No masks, no pretense, just you and me, discovering the truth together."

Hannibal's hands slid down Will's back, pulling him closer, their bodies pressed together. "You are my masterpiece," Hannibal whispered, his voice laced with a possessive tenderness that made Will's heart race.

“A muse for the art you create?” Will felt the pull of Hannibal’s words, his body responding. “Are you going to make me sing for you?”

Hannibal's smile was both comforting and predatory as he leaned in to claim Will's lips in a slow, deliberate kiss. "With pleasure," he murmured against Will's mouth, before trailing his kisses down to the vulnerable curve of Will's neck, beginning the tender, intimate unraveling of all that Will had kept hidden, even from himself.

"You taste as divine as you look," Hannibal whispered against Will's skin, his breath warm and enticing. He continued his slow descent, his lips exploring the curve of Will's throat, the hollow between his collarbones, savoring every inch of exposed skin. “It’s difficult to deny my own urges when you always provide a sumptuous banquet for me.”

Will closed his eyes, letting himself melt into the touch. “And I already know how you taste.” Will smiled back, eyes half-lidded as he bit his bottom lip. Turning his head slightly, his lips brushed against Hannibal's ear as he whispered, "And you're mine."

Hannibal raised his head to meet Will's gaze, their eyes locking in an intense exchange. "And you, are mine," Hannibal repeated, his voice a soft growl, laden with promise. Will's words reverberated through him. The idea of possession, mutual and undeniable, sparked something dark and thrilling within him. "But if you are truly mine, I want to savor every moment of you... fully."

He trailed his fingers down Will's arms, feeling the muscles tense and relax under his touch. Hannibal’s eyes never left Will’s, searching for the hint of desire that matched his own. He leaned closer, his breath brushing against Will’s lips. "Would you allow me the pleasure of binding you, Will? To take away your control, just for tonight, so that you can experience what it truly means to be ***mine?*** "

Will’s breath hitched slightly, the tension between them thickening. His mind raced, the thought of surrendering completely to Hannibal was both terrifying and exhilarating, of being utterly at his mercy.

“I trust you,” Will murmured, his voice husky with anticipation. “Do it. Bind me.”

Hannibal’s smile deepened, his eyes glinting with approval.

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Hannibal guided Will gently onto the bed, his movements deliberate and precise, like an artist preparing his canvas. Undoing the jacket and placing it to the side, before he then took off the shirt.

“Lie back,” Hannibal instructed, his voice a calm, soothing command. He reached over to the bedside table, retrieving a length of rope he had prepared, anticipating the possibility.

Will complied, his back sinking into the soft sheets, his eyes fixed on Hannibal, who was already threading the rope through his fingers with practiced ease.

The rope was smooth, and luxurious against Will’s skin as Hannibal began to weave the rope around his wrists, his movements deliberate, almost ritualistic. A stark contrast to the restraint it symbolized.

Hannibal then repeated the process with Will’s other wrist, binding him to the headboard, moving the rope to create an intricate pattern.

Will’s breathing quickened as he felt the knotted rope being tested by Hannibal’s hand. The gentle tug made him move, the anticipation building with each moment.

Hannibal smirked as he deftly undid Will's pants, sliding them off effortlessly. "Perhaps I should do this after every dinner party," he mused, his fingers continuing their work until Will was completely naked.

“So you can hang everything the way you like?” Will twisted his head, watching Hannibal hang the pants and jacket. Sliding them to the end of the wardrobe, no doubt to be cleaned. All the while, Hannibal remained fully dressed.

“With the opportunity to dress you, then strip it away to see what no one else ever will.” Hannibal purred, tilting his head to admire the sight of Will naked on the bed. Wrists above him, easy for Hannibal to grab and hold if he wanted to.

Will let out a soft chuckle, the sound low and filled with warmth despite the tension in the room. He shifted slightly on the bed, testing the bindings around his wrists, feeling the rope bite into his skin just enough to remind him of his helplessness.

"You always do appreciate the art of presentation," Will murmured, his voice a mix of teasing and admiration. His eyes followed Hannibal's every move, a mixture of trust and longing in them. "But I think you enjoy the process of unraveling even more, stripping away the layers, revealing what's underneath."

Will’s gaze flickered with a hint of mischief as he continued, “And I’d say I’m quite fortunate to be the only one you’d care to dress… and undress. Not that I'd complain about the latter. You are the only person whose touch I have ever craved."

Will’s breath hitched slightly as he watched Hannibal approach the bed, the anticipation making his pulse quicken. "So, Hannibal," he added, his voice dropping to a whisper, "what do you intend to do with me now that I'm yours to unravel?"

“Anything I want, but first.” Hannibal stepped back from the bed, his eyes roving over Will’s bound form, taking in every detail with an artist’s appreciation. Will’s chest rose and fell with shallow breaths, his body stretched out and completely vulnerable.

The ropes held him in place, a reminder of his helplessness, being at Hannibal’s mercy.

Hannibal instead moved to a nearby chair, pulling it closer to the foot of the bed. He sat down, his posture relaxed, one leg crossed over the other, eyes intently watching Will.

The air thickening with anticipation, Will’s eyes followed Hannibal’s every movement, confusion flickering in them as he realized Hannibal wasn’t coming back to him right away.

The anticipation that had built up inside him turned into a gnawing ache. He tugged at the ropes instinctively, testing them, but they held firm. He was completely at Hannibal’s mercy. Yet, he wanted nothing more than to have Hannibal touching him, invade his senses and taking over.

Being left on the bed, naked and tied made him yearn him more.

“Hannibal…” Will’s voice was a whisper, his tone already laced with need.

But Hannibal only tilted his head slightly, his gaze unyielding, silent. He was watching him like prey, he wanted to see Will struggle, to wither with need and ask for his attention.

Will’s frustration grew, the desire inside him sharpening with every second that Hannibal remained out of reach.

He bit his lip, his breath quickening. “Please,” he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hannibal remained silent, his expression calm, but now there was a dark amusement in his eyes as he watched Will struggle. He was enjoying this, the sight of Will so desperate, the scent of slick beginning to fill the room and WIll’s own cock half hard with yearning desire.

All because of him. The power Hannibal held in that moment was intoxicating for him, and Will couldn’t deny him when all he wanted was Hannibal’s touch.

“Please, Hannibal,” Will tried again, his voice trembling with urgency. The ache inside him was becoming unbearable, a fire that only Hannibal could extinguish. “Touch me… I need you.”

Still, Hannibal didn’t move, his gaze fixed on Will’s flushed skin, the way his body strained against the bindings, every muscle taut with longing. He let the silence stretch, the tension between them growing thicker with each passing moment.

Will’s desperation finally broke through the last of his restraint. He tugged at the ropes again, harder this time, his voice pleading, almost broken. “Hannibal, I’m begging you. Please… I can’t take it anymore. I need you to touch me. Please…”

The sound of Will begging, his voice raw with need, sent a shiver down Hannibal's spine. He uncrossed his legs, leaning forward slightly, his eyes never leaving Will's. The corner of his mouth curled into a small, satisfied smile.

"Very well," Hannibal said softly, his voice a velvet caress that made Will's breath hitch. He rose from the chair with grace, moving towards the bed with deliberate slowness, each step measured, savoring the sight of Will's desperate anticipation.

He leaned over Will, his lips ghosting over the skin of his abdomen, just out of reach. "You've begged so beautifully, Will," Hannibal murmured, his voice dark and smooth. "Now, let me reward you."

Hannibal's hands finally descended on Will's trembling body, his touch igniting every nerve, every sensation heightened by the wait. Will gasped, his head falling back against the pillow, as Hannibal's lips moved over his cock, then tongue.

The gentle suck took Will by surprise, eyes closing as his hips rose, biting into his bottom lip as he let out a guttural moan. "Hannibal!"

"Yes darling?" Hannibal paused, eyes meeting Will's own as he kissed the tip of Will's cock.

"Don't stop," Will breathed.

Hannibal's eyes sparkled with mirth, lips moving back over Will as he took him in his mouth again, cheeks hollowing as he sucked.

The intensity had Will right on the edge already, toes curling as his body tensed and twitched, trying to prolong the pleasure Hannibal gave him until he saw white, body stilling as it tensed, then coming.

He could feel Hannibal's tongue swirl around, the lick to his slit as the alpha swallowed.

By the time Will came back down, he was breathless. Chest heaving as he felt the slick against the sheets, arms tugging on the rope as Hannibal moved away.

For a moment, Will wanted to protest, until he watched Hannibal slowly undressing.

It felt like another torture, to see Hannibal strip away his own layers so slowly. Each item being carefully hung as Will felt goosebumps rising on his skin as his body cooled.

The only time Hannibal paused was when he wanted to savour the shiver that ran through Will's body. Head tilting, eyes calculated.

"Hannibal… Please."

"So polite," Hannibal mused, slowly making his way back to the bed as he delighted in every twitch of Will's body. The way he tugged and tried to entice him, to draw the alpha in, until Hannibal climbed slowly onto the bed.

Hannibal's eyes darkened with a mix of satisfaction and hunger as he watched Will's body react to his touch. The shiver that coursed through Will was a symphony to his senses, a testament to the control he wielded so effortlessly over the man beneath him. He could feel the tension in Will's muscles, the way his breath hitched, the slight arch of his back as he sought more contact, more of Hannibal's touch.

Pausing for a moment, Hannibal leaned closer, his gaze locked on Will's face, studying every nuance of his expression. He wanted to imprint this moment into his memory, to savor every reaction, every tremble that he coaxed from Will's body.

Hannibal's head tilted slightly, a small, satisfied smile curling his lips. His tongue darted out, wetting his lips as he reveled in the sight before him—the omega who had become the center of his world, lying there, utterly vulnerable and at his mercy.

“I could spend eternity savoring you like this,” Hannibal murmured, his voice low and velvety, each word caressing the air between them. “Watching the way your body responds to me… it’s a pleasure unlike any other.”

He let his fingers trail lightly over Will’s chest, tracing the contours of his skin, feeling the faint shudder that followed his touch. Hannibal leaned down, his lips brushing against Will’s ear, his breath warm and tantalizing.

“Don’t hold back, Will. I want to feel every shiver, hear every gasp. Let me savor every inch of you.”

Will took a slow, deliberate breath, his body still humming from Hannibal’s touch. The air in the room was thick with tension, anticipation crackling between them. He hesitated for only a moment, searching Hannibal’s eyes for that unspoken connection, the trust that had been built between them. Finding it there, unwavering, Will allowed himself to move.

He shifted, carefully rolling onto his belly, his movements unhurried, almost languid. The ropes held firm, stretching his arms above his head, but he didn’t resist.

Instead, he settled into the new position, pressing his chest into the cool sheets, his back arching slightly as his arms remained elevated. Will’s breath was steady, but there was an underlying tremor of anticipation as he presented himself to Hannibal, a silent gesture of submission. He was widening his knees as he felt the cool air against the slick that trickled from his ass.

The vulnerability of the position sent a shiver through Will, his heart beating faster with every passing second.

He could feel Hannibal’s eyes on him, a gaze so intense it was almost tangible. The room was silent, save for the sound of their breathing, and the weight of what Will had just offered hung in the air between them.

Presenting himself to his alpha, the submission Hannibal had wanted, with complete acceptance from Will.

Will turned his head slightly, his cheek resting against the pillow, eyes half-lidded as he looked back at Hannibal. “I’m yours,” Will whispered, the words a quiet surrender, filled with trust and need. His voice was soft but steady, a clear invitation for Hannibal to take him.

Hannibal’s breath hitched almost imperceptibly as he absorbed the sight before him. Will, laid bare and vulnerable, offering himself completely without hesitation. A surge of possessiveness and clawed insideof Hannibal, his control nearly slipping at the sight of Will’s submission.

Leaning forward, Hannibal let his hands resting on either side of Will’s hips, lips ghosting over the small of Will’s back. He paused there, savoring the moment, letting the tension build, feeling the way Will’s body trembled beneath him.

“Exquisite,” Hannibal murmured, his voice reverent. “You have no idea how much pleasure I take in your submission, Will.”

Fingers trail down Will’s spine, slow and deliberate, each touch sending a shiver through Will’s body.

“You’re mine,” Hannibal repeated, his voice firm, admiring the way Will offered himself so completely, so willingly. “And I’m going to make sure you never forget it.”

Will’s breath hitched as he felt Hannibal’s lips moving down, kissing the top of his ass before hands moved to spread him open. When teeth nipped at the tender ring of skin, Will jolted on the bed, only to be firmly held in place by Hannibal as he began to nip and suck, opening him up with his mouth.

“You’re so responsive, Will,” Hannibal whispered against his skin, his voice thick with desire. He let his hands slide up Will’s sides, feeling the ripple of muscles beneath his touch. “So eager to give yourself to me.”

“Yes! Alpha, please!” Will’s breath hitched with each movement of Hannibal’s lips. When the touch of fingers came, the gentle slide of them inside of him, stretching to open wider, Will let his knees slide further apart. Welcoming his alpha’s touch, eager for more as he tried to stay still, unable to when Hannibal played him better than the harpsichord.

Hannibal pressed a lingering kiss to Will’s hole, slow and deep, before pulling back slightly, his eyes dark with desire. “Now, let me explore every part of you, without rush, without restraint.”

With a careful, deliberate touch, Hannibal began to open Will up, fingers gentle and insistent. He took his time, savoring every sound, every movement Will made beneath him. The ropes kept Will’s wrists bound above his head, a constant reminder of his vulnerability, his submission.

Then lips moved away, Will arched his back when Hannibal pressed his chest to his back, skin-on-skin contact as he turned his head. Hannibal captured his lips, soft at first as Will tasted himself, then rougher. More urgent as Hannibal began to rock.

As Hannibal opened Will, he pressed his chest more firmly against Will’s back, the heat between them intensifying with each passing moment.

Hannibal’s lips felt connected to Will’s own, stealing his breath away while his fingers probed. Every inch of him was in Hannibal’s control.

Will’s breath hitched, his body tensing momentarily before relaxing into Hannibal’s touch, trusting him completely sent a wave of pleasure coursing through him. He let out a quiet moan, his head falling forward onto the pillow, surrendering to the sensation, to Hannibal’s control.

Hannibal paused for a moment, savoring the way Will responded to him, the way his body opened up, ready and willing. The connection between them was tangible, an unspoken understanding that needed no words. He leaned down, his lips brushing against Will's ear as he whispered, "You're mine, Will. Completely, utterly mine."

"I'll always be yours," Will breathed. A need for more as he lifted his ass higher in the air, wanting to be filled entirely.

With that, Hannibal pressed forward, claiming Will with a slow, deliberate motion, his body molding against Will's as they became one. A sensory overload that sent them both spiraling deeper into each other, lost in the dark, intoxicating pleasure of their connection.

Hannibal thrusted, and Will couldn't help but to moan and scream with each thrust that rocked him against the bed and headboard. Feeling his body accommodate Hannibal, taking everything he gave and trying to meet him with each thrust. The gentle nudge of Hannibal's growing knot.

The rope that had been used to bind him down became a needed ally to allow him to hold on to Hannibal and meet his enthusiasm. Pulling on the binds as he arched back to accept each thrust Hannibal provided him.

A moan ripped from his throat as he felt Hannibal's knot expand, the bulge of it hitting against his rim.

"Be good for me," Hannibal whispered, leaning in to steal Will's breath. "Be good and take it."

Their lips sealed together as Hannibal pushed inside, knot expanding as Will screamed, Hannibal savouring each note as he roughly kissed Will back.

Will could only see white as the knot seated inside of him, Hannibal letting out a breath and relaxing as he came deep inside of Will.

Hannibal moved to hold Will close, hand moving underneath him, letting Will down slowly as he hummed when he could feel the gentle bulge in his belly, the seed within his mate, and the swell of his knot that made his own cock twitch with interest again.

Fingers came to Will's face, reverently moving his curls, watching how Will breathed, his eyes closed with pleasure, lips parted and cheeks flushed. The smile Will wore when he looked back at Hannibal. Gold glinting in the low light, seeing the Hannibal's own ruby red.

"You have no idea how I adore you," Hannibal whispered, moving to kiss every inch of Will's face. Nuzzingly into him with the need to soothe and protect. Legs entwining to keep Will close. Hands coming to undo the rope that held Will's arms in place, allowing them to fall to his sides as Hannibal gently massaged them.

Will's breath caught in his throat as Hannibal's words washed over him, the warmth of them seeping into his very being. The tenderness in Hannibal's voice, in the way he kissed and nuzzled against him, was almost overwhelming. Will could feel the steady, reassuring weight of Hannibal's body pressed close to his, their legs entwined as if Hannibal was trying to merge them into one.

Hannibal's lips were gentle as they brushed over Will's forehead, his cheeks, the corners of his mouth, each kiss a silent declaration of devotion. Will closed his eyes, letting the sensation envelop him, feeling the soft tremble of Hannibal's breath against his skin.

In that moment, the intensity of everything they shared culminated in a wave of emotion that Will could no longer hold back.

He opened his eyes, looking up at Hannibal with a gaze filled with raw honesty, the vulnerability in his expression mirrored by the warmth in Hannibal's eyes. Will's voice was soft, barely above a whisper, but the words carried the weight of everything he felt.

"I love you," Will murmured, his voice steady, filled with a quiet certainty. He reached up, his fingers brushing lightly against Hannibal's cheek. "I love you, Hannibal… more than I can ever put into words."

Hannibal paused, his breath hitching for just a moment, the world narrowing down to the two of them. He pressed his forehead against Will's, his eyes closing as he absorbed the depth of Will's confession. The words hung in the air, a promise, a bond that was as unbreakable as it was undeniable.

In response, Hannibal's arms tightened around Will, pulling him even closer, his need to protect and cherish this man overwhelming everything else. He kissed Will again, slower this time, with a reverence that spoke volumes, their connection deepening with each shared breath, each whispered promise.

"You're beautiful like this," Hannibal whispered, his breath warm against Will's mouth. "Completely mine."

"Always," Will whispered.

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Will stirred in the middle of the night, his senses slowly drifting back to consciousness as the shrill ring of the phone cut through the quiet. He groggily blinked his eyes open, the dim light from the bedside lamp casting soft shadows across the room. The warmth of Hannibal's body beside him had always been a comfort.

Will heard the soft rustle of sheets as Hannibal slipped out of bed, moving with his usual quiet grace.

"Just leave it." Will groggily rolled over.

"Unfortunately I can't" Hannibal replied, voice rough with sleep. "I'm on call this weekend."

Still caught in the haze of sleep, Will barely registered the low murmur of Hannibal's voice as he answered the call.

The words were indistinct, a gentle hum at the edge of Will's consciousness, but there was an edge to Hannibal's tone that made him strain to listen.

Will's eyes drifted shut again, but his mind lingered on the sound of Hannibal's voice, trying to make sense of it. He heard the conversation in snippets—words like "emergency" and "necessary" filtering through, enough to spark concern even in his drowsy state. He shifted slightly, trying to rouse himself fully, but sleep still clung to him like a heavy blanket.

A moment later, Hannibal's voice grew closer, and Will felt the mattress dip as Hannibal sat back down on the edge of the bed. Will forced his eyes open, blinking up at Hannibal's figure silhouetted against the low light. Hannibal's expression was calm, but there was a hint of regret in his eyes as he reached out to gently brush the hair from Will's forehead.

"I'm sorry, Will," Hannibal said softly, his voice tinged with genuine regret. "It seems I'm needed at the hospital."

Will frowned slightly, trying to shake off the last remnants of sleep. "Now?" he mumbled, his voice thick and drowsy.

Hannibal nodded, his thumb gently stroking Will's temple. "I'm afraid so. I wouldn't leave if it weren't necessary."

Will managed a small, tired smile, the concern in his eyes softening as he looked up at Hannibal. "I know," he murmured, his voice still heavy with sleep. "Just… be careful."

Hannibal leaned down, pressing a tender kiss to Will's forehead, his lips lingering there for a moment longer than necessary. "Rest, Will. I'll be back as soon as I can," he whispered, his voice a soothing balm against the worry in Will's heart.

Will closed his eyes again, the warmth of Hannibal's kiss still lingering on his skin as sleep began to pull him under once more. He felt the bed shift as Hannibal stood up, and heard the quiet sounds of him getting dressed, but the comforting sound of Hannibal's voice still

echoed in his mind, lulling him back to sleep even as he listened to the faint sounds of Hannibal preparing to leave.

As the door clicked shut behind Hannibal, Will drifted back into a deep, dreamless sleep, reassured by the knowledge that Hannibal would return to him soon.

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The phone rang in the early hours, its shrill tone cutting through the silence of the night. Will stirred, his eyes fluttering open in the darkness. For a moment, he considered ignoring it, letting sleep pull him back into its embrace. The second time he'd been woken by the phone. Like life refused to let him sleep in or rest.

Hannibal wasn't there, and Will just wanted to sleep and wait for the alpha to come home. To stay in the warm bed, to bask in Hannibal's scent and let it ease him back to a peaceful sleep.

But then the phone rang again, more insistent this time. Refusing to allow Will to ignore it.

With a resigned sigh, Will swung his legs over the side of the bed, the mattress creaking in protest. He glanced longingly at the warm, rumpled sheets before reaching for the phone on the nightstand.

"Hello?" His voice was groggy, still thick with sleep.

"Will." Dave's voice came through, gruff and urgent. "How soon can you get to Trentham Park?"

Will blinked, trying to shake off the lingering fog of sleep. "I have no idea. Where is it?"

"Well, pull out a map and find it or catch a taxi. Just get here as quick as possible."

Will stifled a yawn, rubbing his eyes as he processed the request. "What is it?"

Dave's exasperation was palpable, even over the phone. "Like if Terminator and Alien had a baby. I've never seen anything like it."

"Like what?"

"A murder!" Dave snapped, his frustration evident. "Why do you think I was calling you at four in the morning?"

The seriousness of the situation finally registered, and Will's demeanor shifted. "Right, I'm on the way." He hung up the phone and immediately began pulling on his clothes, the urgency of the call pushing away the remnants of sleep.

As he dressed, the gravity of what awaited him began to settle in. Dave's description—vague yet horrifying—echoed in his mind. This wasn't just another case; it was something different, something far more disturbing. Will moved quickly, the quiet of the early morning punctuated only by the sounds of his hurried preparation.

Once ready, he grabbed his coat and keys, pausing for a brief moment at the door to collect his thoughts. Whatever he was about to walk into, he needed to be prepared. Taking a deep breath, Will stepped out into the cold night, already mentally bracing himself for the gruesome scene that awaited him at Trentham Park.

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Will arrived at the crime scene just as dawn began to break, the early morning light casting long shadows across the ground. The air was thick with the chill of the night, mingling with the distant hum of police radios and the muffled voices of officers going about their grim tasks. Red and blue lights flashed, illuminating in the frost as Will made his way towards the yellow tape. The scene was cordoned off, a sea of yellow tape marking the boundary between the ordinary world and the horrors within.

“Graham, what are you doing here?”

“He’s with me, got a problem?” Dave came over, held the tape up and ushered Will in.

He ducked under the tape, flashing a smile to the officer on duty, who nodded and stepped aside with a glare.

As Will walked forward, his senses heightened, taking in every detail, every scent, every flicker of movement. The officers who had witnessed the scene looked somewhat baffled and oddly impressed.

From a distance, Will saw the man on the bench, the suitcase sitting next to him open. It would almost look normal if it wasn’t for the gaping hole in his abdomen.

The body was splayed out with a kind of deliberate precision, a grotesque parody of vulnerability. Whoever had done this had taken their time, treating the body as both a canvas and a message. That message wasn’t for the victim, or the next possible victim. It was for everyone who saw the scene.

It was a mix of elegance and precision, macabre while hauntingly beautiful in its complexity.

Coming closer, there was something almost comical about how the man sat on the bench now, arms stretched over the back. An open position with the open suitcase, intestines placed neatly inside with a few organs Will was yet to decipher.

“Mark Fletcher 48yo beta Male,” Dave spoke, his voice almost detached as he looked at the scene, eyes still trying to take in the details layered within. “A used car salesman who always carried an empty briefcase around for show.”

Will's eyes swept over the scene, taking in every detail as Dave's words lingered in the air. “A man who crafted a facade,” Will murmured, his voice low and reflective. “Hiding his emptiness behind a veneer of success. The briefcase, was always empty, just like the life he led. The killer saw that... and stripped him of even that illusion.”

He glanced at Dave, the weight of his thoughts heavy in his gaze. "This wasn't just a murder. This was a message. The killer is mocking the persona he projected, laying bare the hollow shell underneath.”

Dave looked at Will, his expression a mix of concern and curiosity. “You think the killer knew him well enough to see through that facade?”

Will’s mind already beginning to piece together the sequence of events that had led to this moment. He could feel the killer’s presence in the park, an almost tangible force that lingered in the air, heavy with malice and control.

He wanted to look closer at the body, he could sense the meticulous care that had gone into the placement of each wound. The killer had known exactly where to cut, how to avoid unnecessary mess, how to prolong the victim’s suffering while keeping them alive, if only just, until the very end.

Will knelt beside the body, his fingers hovering over the wounds without touching them. He could almost feel the cold steel of the blade as it had sliced through flesh, the sickening precision with which it had been wielded. He closed his eyes for a moment, allowing himself to slip into the killer’s mind, to see the scene as they had seen it.

He could picture the killer standing over the body, eyes devoid of emotion, focused only on the task at hand. Each movement was deliberate, each cut serving a purpose. The killer had wanted this to be seen, to be studied. This was a twisted form of artistry placed on display as through the park was a gallery.

The realization hit Will with a cold, sinking feeling in his gut. This was no ordinary killer. This was someone who took pride in their work, someone who viewed murder as an art form, a means of expression. And this crime scene was their masterpiece.

Will's eyes opened, and he exhaled slowly, trying to shake off the darkness that had momentarily overtaken him. He knew this was just the beginning, that this killer was far from finished.

Will shrugged, his gaze returning to the body. "The way he's positioned, the care taken to preserve the face while the rest of him is laid open… it's as if the killer wanted to expose the truth that Fletcher tried so hard to hide. The empty briefcase was a symbol of the life he wanted people to believe he had, but the killer knew better. They saw through the charade and turned it into something grotesque… It's an unveiling."

"Why a used car salesman?" Dave huffed.

Will's gaze lingered on the lifeless body as he began to speak, his voice thoughtful and measured. "Salesmen are experts in deception. Their livelihood depends on presenting a polished exterior, hiding the truth beneath layers of charm and rehearsed lines."

A step around the body, to the back, evidence that nothing was hiding in the scene. It was laid open for all to see. "They know how to mask their flaws, to redirect attention away from the imperfections that could cost them a sale. It's a skill honed over years, turning the truth into something malleable, something that can be twisted and shaped to fit the narrative they want you to believe."

He knelt beside the body, his eyes tracing the cuts, the careful dissection that seemed to mirror the act of unmasking. "But the flaws are always there, beneath the surface, waiting to be exposed. The killer saw that in Mark Fletcher, saw the emptiness behind the smile, the hollowness that the empty briefcase symbolized. It wasn't just a tool for work; it was a metaphor for his life. A vessel that should have been filled with substance, with meaning, but was instead empty, a hollow shell."

Will paused, his mind weaving together the narrative the killer had laid out. "The killer understood that Fletcher's entire persona was a facade, carefully constructed to hide the truth. And in death, they tore away that facade, exposing the emptiness that Fletcher had spent his life concealing. It's as if the killer wanted to strip him down to his core, to reveal the truth he had tried so hard to hide."

He looked up at Dave, his expression intense. “This wasn’t just about killing Fletcher. It was exposing the raw, unvarnished reality that lay beneath. It’s a statement, a dark commentary on the futility of hiding who we really are. In the end, the truth always comes out, no matter how deeply we try to bury it.”

Dave swallowed hard, the detached mask he’d been wearing starting to slip. “So, what does that mean? Why go through all this trouble just to send a message?”

Will’s expression darkened. “It’s more than just a message. It’s an invitation to who could see the layers beneath the brutality. The killer is playing a game, one where the pieces are more than just victims. They’re elements of a larger puzzle, a story being told through death.”

Will took a step closer to the body, his eyes narrowing as he studied the wounds. “The precision here… it’s surgical. There’s no rage, no chaos. This was done with purpose, with a cold, calculated intent. The killer didn’t just want to end Fletcher’s life, they wanted to show the emptiness within.”

“Not the first time he’s killed someone then.” Dave swallowed.

For a moment, Will appreciated the body, the symbolism of it as he looked up to meet Dave’s eyes, seeing the look of disgust, the way his mouth twisted and his neck indented slightly. No doubt bile caught in his throat, a taste of death on his tongue that he tried to cover.

“Surgical in nature.” Dave frowned, the realization dawning on him. “Someone who has spent years perfecting his craft with the nature of these cuts, the attention to detail in the scene. The meaning behind it.” A sigh left his lips, a huff with the smallest smile. “We’ll pull his sales records, anyone with a surgical background that could have done this.”

“It won’t be that easy.” Will cocked his head, part of him reveling in the work, a satisfaction settling over him. “This takes time and skill. No doubt he’s killed before, but not like this. He’s sending a message.”

“And what is that message?” Dave almost wanted to roll his eyes.

“This wasn’t just murder; this was a performance, an act meant to elicit both fear and admiration.” Will paused, his thoughts shifting to the deeper implications. “This isn’t just about Mark Fletcher. It’s about redirection, he wants our attention.”

Dave exhaled slowly, the weight of the thought pressing down on him. “He doesn’t just kill for pleasure. There’s organs missing, the coroner already highlighted his heart isn’t here, and kidney. But we won’t know the full extent until we get him to an autopsy.”

“This takes skill,” Will spoke, knowing he was repeating himself.

“Missing organs though,” Dave let out a sigh. “Trophies you can’t collect in a medical profession. You have to go out and find your own.”

“The cuts were clean, methodical. Each one a testament to the killer's skill and detachment.” Will spoke, knowing there was more to it, but not knowing what that was.

“Perhaps we are looking for someone who wasn’t appreciated for their skill.” Dave nodded, the idea forming. “Disgruntled medical professional, takes matters into his own hands. Like a modern-day Jack the Ripper.”

“Jack the Ripper didn’t have any real skill.” Will stood tall, taking a step back. “Even a butcher could have performed those cuts that were performed on his victims. Along with the choice of prostitute’s. Easy prey for a killer. A salesman, that was known. There’s more to it.”

“And a hunter could not be as clean and methodical as this?” Dave brought his hand up. “You’ve given me a profile. That’s all I need for now, and you better get out of here before another journalist takes your photo!”

“Right,” Will muttered under his breath, the weight of the scene pressing down on him as he turned away. He headed back toward the yellow tape, his mind still processing the layers of meaning hidden within the brutality.

The cop from earlier, who had been watching from a distance, lifted the tape for him as he approached. There was a glint of something like admiration in the officer's eyes, an acknowledgment of Will's ability to confront the grotesque scene without flinching, no matter how unsettling.

"Hell of a thing to stomach," the cop remarked, his tone a mix of respect and disbelief.

Will offered a tight, almost absent nod as he ducked under the tape, his thoughts already shifting from the horror of the scene to the mind behind it. The intricacies of the crime were still turning over in his head, each detail a thread leading him deeper into the labyrinth of the killer's intent.

"Dave's right, though. Looks almost like a Jack the Ripper killing," the cop nodded, his voice tinged with the unease that came from seeing such brutality up close. "Just ugly violence."

"No," Will muttered, feeling a spark of irritation at the comparison. He turned back toward the scene, his gaze hardening. "This killer is elevating the act. Jack the Ripper was driven by chaos, by a need to dominate and destroy, but this… this is something else entirely."

He paused, trying to articulate what he had seen. "This killer isn't just taking lives, he's crafting a message, turning murder into a form of expression. There's no frenzy, no careless brutality. Every cut, every detail is deliberate, precise. It's not about the violence; it's about what the violence represents. It's a statement, a carefully constructed narrative meant to be understood by someone who can see beyond the blood and gore."

"So what would you call him?" The cop gruffed back.

"You shouldn't give him a name or a title. It's exactly what he would want," Will said, his mouth twisting slightly, a flash of teeth visible as the thought took shape. "The 'Ripper' element carries a certain respect, invokes fear within its wake. A name like that gives him power, a legacy."

He glanced toward the distance, his eyes finding the calm expanse of the Chesapeake Bay. The stillness of the water seemed at odds with the horrors they were dealing with, but it also reflected the killer's nature—a deceptive calm masking the storm within.

“Chesapeake Ripper,” Will muttered, almost to himself. “He’d be like a hurricane, calm until the storm hits, and then everything is destroyed in its wake. Nothing spared, nothing left untouched. The violence would be sudden, precise, and all-consuming, just like the eye of a storm, with an eerie calm at its center that’s even more terrifying because you know what’s coming next.”

Will's gaze returned to the crime scene, the gravity of what they were dealing with settling over him. “He’s not just killing. He’s creating something, and we’re meant to bear witness to it.”

As he stepped away from the crime scene, the cold morning air hit him, sharp and bracing, but it did little to clear the heaviness that clung to him. He knew this was only the beginning.

There would be another body, and it struck Will deeply.

Part of him yearning to see what this killer would create next.

-

Hannibal was sitting in the lecture hall, watching the presentation from a fellow surgeon as Donald slid into a chair beside him.

The dark room and light from the projector highlighted the downturn of Donald’s lips, the tension in his forehead. How his lips were taut.

“I had believed you were going to invite me to your dinner party,” Donald spoke softly as the presentation continued.

“The next one,” Hannibal spoke honestly. “I invited a special guest. Did you receive my gift though?”

“The lunch in my office.” Donald smiled, tilting his head. “Delicious. The next one will hopefully be better than your leftovers.”

Hannibal hummed softly, the sound almost lost beneath the lecturer's voice, but it carried a note of satisfaction. His eyes never left the presentation, yet his focus seemed elsewhere, as though he were savoring a private thought.

“I’m pleased you enjoyed it,” Hannibal replied, his tone polite, but with an undercurrent that hinted at something darker. “I take pride in ensuring my guests are well-fed, even if they are only receiving a taste of what’s to come.”

Donald’s smile grew, though the tension in his face remained. “You have a gift for making even the simplest meals feel like a luxury,” he said, the compliment tinged with both admiration and something akin to wariness. “I must say, the flavors were… unique. I’m curious about the special guest you mentioned. Must be someone quite extraordinary to earn such an exclusive invitation.”

Hannibal finally turned his head slightly to regard Donald, his expression unreadable in the dim light. “Extraordinary indeed,” he said, his voice smooth. “A guest who appreciates the finer things, just as you do, Donald.”

“Seems a waste if she will not be returning.” Donald turned his attention to the lecture. The surgical video played out, blood spilling, a gloved hand moving to suction it out of the way. The video paused, and the image froze mid-operation as the lecturer began a detailed discussion of the technique.

Hannibal's gaze flickered to the screen, the faintest trace of amusement in his eyes. “A waste, perhaps,” he murmured, his voice smooth and measured. “But not all things are meant to last. Some are meant to be savored in the moment, their absence enhancing the memory of their presence.”

“Until then, I trust you’ll continue to enjoy the offerings I provide,” Hannibal added, turning back to the presentation with the slightest of smiles. “Consider it a preview of the feast to come.”

“Now I’m truly intrigued.” Donald smiled back, eyes forward.

Hannibal closed his eyes, heading into his memory palace.

The dining room was shrouded in an air of quiet inevitability, the candlelight casting soft, flickering shadows across the elegantly set table. Lady Murasaki sat across from Hannibal, her posture as graceful and composed as ever, but there was a heaviness in the air between them, an unspoken understanding that this would be their final meal together.

Tonight, there were no illusions, no masks left to wear. The meat on their plates, tender and expertly prepared, held a truth that had long been simmering beneath the surface of their relationship. Hannibal had chosen to reveal himself fully to her, knowing that this revelation would sever the bond they once shared.

Every trace of it. Proof he had moved on from her, that he had never taken her bitter words to heart.

Lady Murasaki’s eyes, always so keen and perceptive, met Hannibal’s across the table. There was no fear in her gaze, only a profound sadness, mingled with a deep understanding. She knew the origin of the meat before her, knew what it meant for Hannibal to serve it to her, and yet she did not recoil. Instead, she acknowledged it with a calm acceptance, as if this final act had been an inevitable part of their journey together.

“You have shown me your true self, Hannibal,” she said softly, her voice steady but laced with sorrow. “The man behind the mask, the one you’ve kept hidden for so long.”

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, a gesture of acknowledgment. “I have,” he replied, his tone devoid of pretense. “You deserve the truth, Murasaki. You’ve always seen me more clearly than anyone else, but now you see me as I truly am.”

She took a slow, deliberate bite of the meat, her eyes never leaving his. The taste was exquisite, as always, Hannibal's culinary mastery was undeniable, but the knowledge of what she was consuming added a bitter undertone that lingered on her tongue.

"This meal," she said after a moment, placing her fork down gently, "is not just a farewell. It is a declaration, a statement of who you've become."

Hannibal's gaze softened, a rare glimpse of vulnerability crossing his features. "You were the last tether to the man I once was, before the darkness took hold. But I can no longer live in the shadow of who I was. My path now lies elsewhere, and it is a path that cannot cross with yours."

Lady Murasaki nodded, the weight of his words settling over her like a heavy shroud. "I understand," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But it pains me to see you like this, Hannibal. The man I once loved, the man you could have been… he is lost to me now."

"There was a time," Hannibal replied, his voice carrying a quiet intensity, "when I believed I could be that man for you. But that time has passed. The darkness within me was never something to be contained. It is not in a beast's nature to be caged."

Lady Murasaki's eyes flickered with a mix of sorrow and resignation as she absorbed his words. The man before her was no longer the refined, complex individual she had once hoped to save from himself, but rather the embodiment of a primal force that could not be restrained.

"You speak of your darkness as if it were inevitable," she said softly, her voice tinged with a deep sadness. "As if it were a destiny you could not escape."

Hannibal's gaze held hers, unwavering. "It is not destiny, Murasaki. It is who I am, who I have always been, beneath the surface. You saw the man I presented to the world, but beneath that facade, the beast was always there, waiting. Your cage was never strong enough to hold it."

She nodded slowly, as if she had always known this truth but had only now come to fully accept it. “And now, there is no cage left at all,” she said, her words carrying the weight of finality. As though the gold bars she had created now laid down around them sparkling in the light.

Hannibal’s expression softened, a rare glimpse of something almost like regret passing over his features. “No,” he agreed, his voice low. “There is no cage, and no desire for one. But even you could not change what was always destined to be.”

“I never wanted to change you,” she replied, her tone firm yet gentle. “I only wished for you to find peace within yourself, to live without the constant pull of the darkness. But I see now that peace was never possible for you, not the kind I had hoped for.”

Hannibal’s expression softened, a rare glimpse of the man he might have been had his life taken a different course. “Peace is not in my nature. But there is a kind of peace in accepting who I am, in embracing the darkness rather than fighting it.”

Lady Murasaki nodded, the sadness in her eyes deepening. “Then I hope, in your own way, you find the fulfillment you seek, Hannibal. But know that the path you’ve chosen is a lonely one. It will consume you, piece by piece, until there is nothing left.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal said, his voice calm, almost reflective. “But the path is not as lonely as one might believe. Sometimes, we find a reflection, someone who can truly see us and understand.”

Lady Murasaki’s eyes narrowed slightly as she absorbed his words. The implication was clear, and it struck a chord deep within her. Hannibal, the man she had known and once loved, had found another—someone who resonated with the darkness within him, someone who could walk that treacherous path by his side.

“Will,” she whispered, the name slipping from her lips like a revelation. She had met him, but knew only from a glimpse the strange connection he shared with Hannibal, but only now did she understand the depth of that developing bond.

Hannibal's expression softened, a trace of something almost tender in his eyes. "He is… different," he admitted, his voice carrying a hint of something akin to admiration. "Will sees me, and in time he will truly see me, in a way that no one else ever has. He will understand the darkness, because it lives within him as well."

Lady Murasaki's heart ached at his words, not out of jealousy, but out of a deep, profound sadness. She had once been Hannibal's confidante, the one who understood him better than anyone. But now, she realized, her place had been taken by another, someone who mirrored the darkness that had always lurked in Hannibal's soul.

"And you believe this bond will last?" she asked, her voice gentle but laced with concern. "That he will walk with you down this path, no matter where it leads?"

Hannibal's gaze grew distant, as if he were looking beyond the present, into the uncertain future. "I do not know," he confessed. "But for now, he is my reflection. He is the one who can share in the darkness, who can understand the beast within."

Lady Murasaki nodded slowly, accepting his words even as they deepened the sorrow within her. "Then I hope, for both your sakes, that this bond does not consume you both. The darkness can be a powerful force, but it is also a destructive one."

Hannibal inclined his head, acknowledging her concern. "It is a risk I am willing to take," he said quietly. "For someone who can truly see me, the risk is worth it."

There was nothing more to say. Lady Murasaki had lost Hannibal long before this moment, but now she understood fully what had taken him from her. The darkness that had always been a part of him had found its counterpart in Will, and in that connection, Hannibal had found something he could never have with her.

Her hand trembled slightly as she reached out to touch his face, a gesture filled with both love and sorrow. "I once loved the man," she whispered, her voice breaking slightly. "But I cannot love the beast."

Lady Murasaki withdrew her hand, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Goodbye, Hannibal,” she said, the words heavy with loss.

“Goodbye, Murasaki,” he responded, his tone laced with the finality of their parting.

With a final, sorrowful glance, Lady Murasaki turned and walked away, leaving Hannibal alone at the dinning table. Her plate was half eaten, the only meal he had ever prepared that had been scorned.

Not out of jealousy, but because of what the meat represented.

As the door closed behind her, Hannibal allowed himself to reflect on the path ahead, one that was no longer solitary. Hannibal knew that his and Will’s fates were now irrevocably intertwined. Whatever the future held, it would be a journey they would undertake together, reflections of each other in the darkness.

In time, Murasaki’s door would come to hold cobwebs and dust from misuse. Hannibal would leave her to find comfort in her solitude, to bask in his memories during what she would likely consider happier times. His own attention now to building Will’s section of his memory palace.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An uneasy tension gnawed at Will as he stepped back into the station, the energy in the air different, heavier than usual.

Officers moved with their faces set in hard lines, actions hurried.

The phones were off the hook, their flashing lights a silent testament to the chaos unfolding. Every corner of the room buzzed with urgency, and yet, there was a disquieting stillness beneath it all, as if everyone was bracing for something far worse.

“What happened?” Will asked, his voice low but steady as he entered the homicide unit.

Dave looked up from his desk, his expression grim. Without a word, he pushed a stack of crime scene photos toward Will, the images stark and brutal under the lights.

“Another two victims,” Dave said, his voice tight, barely masking the exhaustion that came with this new killer. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temples as though trying to stave off the inevitable headache. “One of them… he’s on display at a church. Sitting in a pew, bible in his hands like he’s some kind of offering.”

Will’s eyes flicked down to the photos, his breath catching in his throat. The victim was splayed out in grotesque display, a perverse mockery of sanctity, of life itself.

The cold emptiness of the church’s interior only heightened the surreal horror of the tableau. A man reduced to nothing but a symbol, posed with the kind of care only someone who took pride in their work would bother with.

“The other?” Will asked, barely looking up, his eyes still scanning the morbid photographs.

“In his own workshop.” Dave grimaced as he pulled out another set of photos. These were about the presentation, the grim reality of death. “We think he’s the first. He’s been there the longest. The tools were still in his body when we found him. Whatever happened, it started here.”

Will shifted his focus to the second set of images. The victim’s body was a twisted contrast to the precision of the church scene. He lay over his workbench, the tools firmly lodged in his body, his workspace now a crime scene.

There was a certain brutality to it, a quick, violent end compared to the deliberate staging of the other bodies.

Will's mind started turning over the details, the shift in methodology between the two victims gnawing at him.

This killer wasn't merely finishing something. He was… evolving.

This was his beginning in his victim's death.

“The church one… is there a message?” Dave continued, his eyes dark and unflinching as he spoke. “This feels different. Like the killer didn’t care who found him or how.”

Will’s fingers tightened around the edge of the photos, his eyes narrowing as the pieces of the puzzle began to shift in his mind. One victim carefully staged, a message left behind.

The other left to rot in the shadows of his own domain, discarded as if he were merely the first step in a grander design.

Something Will couldn't quite grasp yet, but the feeling of dread creeping up his spine told him it was only the beginning.

"The first victim..." Will muttered, his voice distant as his mind worked to connect the dots. "He wasn't meant to be found like the second. The workshop is a private performance. The killer moved from necessity to showmanship."

Dave nodded slowly, watching as Will pieced it together. "For the police alone."

Will's eyes flicked back to the photo of the victim on the altar, the lifeless body frozen. He could feel the killer's intentions as though they were hanging in the air around him, and that thought alone made his skin crawl. "He wants an audience," Will said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

Dave didn't say anything, just let the silence hang between them. But Will could feel the weight of it, the realization settling in.

The killer was no longer content to work in the shadows. This was something bigger, something darker. The meticulous way the second victim had been displayed, the eerie calm of the church, this was more than a murder. It was the first act.

And Will knew, deep down, that whatever the killer had planned, this was only the beginning.

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Will stood alone in the dimly lit morgue, the fluorescent lights casting a cold, sterile glow over the bodies laid out before him.

His eyes were drawn to the meticulous details of each crime scene, the brutality of the Chesapeake Ripper's work etched into the victims' lifeless forms.

The hum of the ventilation system was the only sound that accompanied his deepening thoughts with the stench of death keeping him in the present moment.

The case files were spread out on the metal table beside him, their contents heavy with the weight of photos capturing the grotesque nature of the crime scenes. He reviewed the details again, trying to make sense of the emerging pattern that eluded everyone but the killer himself.

Alan Barlow, the second victim, was a 34-year-old builder. His life had been a series of transgressions, pending warrants for various offenses, no family to speak of, and a solitary existence marked only by his shady work dealings.

His death was as brutal as the first victim, a display of violence that seemed both personal and calculated.

The alpha's body had been pierced with every single tool he owned in his workshop, left on the table with blood pooling underneath him.

It was less public than the first, he took longer to find due to having no family.

His landlord had made the discovery, chasing the rent he was owed, banging on the door before he decided to turn the knob. The report he gave to the police was that he'd smelled something foul and went in further to investigate.

Will could picture the scene in his mind, the way the glasses and dishes were strewn across the table told a story of their own. The landlord must have bolted when he realized what he was looking at. The dishes hadn't just fallen, they'd been knocked off in a panic.

The third victim, John Bryan, was a pillar of the community. At 45, he was a respected figure, a beta male with a family.

His murder, like the others, was marked by the same severe, ritualistic brutality.

Will’s finger traced the edge of the photo, part of him reveling in the way the killer had worked. The privacy of the morgue was a blessing as Will closed his eyes. Stepping into the killer's shoes.

John Bryan sat in the church pew, the Bible open in his lap, its pages worn and fragile, delicate almost except for the bright pink tongue that served as a page marker. Blood trickling down, almost highlighting certain verses within the page.

The image was haunting, to most. Yet Will didn’t feel revulsion, there was a beauty in the killer’s work. Something that pulled Will in, a desire running deep within to touch.

John Bryan’s chest was hollowed out, ribs cracked open like a grotesque door to an empty vault. His lungs were missing, and his heart had been taken, leaving nothing but a dark, cavernous space where life once pulsed.

His stomach, though, was stuffed with pages torn from the very Bible he had clutched in his hands.

The words he’d once spoken with such conviction were now crammed inside him, silent and distorted.

The grotesque irony wasn’t lost on Will. The picture painted a chilling narrative: a heartless man who had wielded the gospel like a weapon, using it to nourish his own ego rather than his soul.

The way he’d manipulated the gospel to suit his needs, using it as a shield to deflect criticism and as a blade to cut down those who dared oppose him, now seemed to be echoed in his own brutal demise.

The imagery was unmistakable, a man who had lived by hollow words, devoid of genuine compassion, his heart and lungs, the very essence of life and breath, torn away. The Bible, once a symbol of faith, had been reduced to something grotesque, left in the hands of an empty man, to mock the emptiness that had always been there.

Will's mind churned with the irony of it all, a man who had now become the ultimate victim of his own hypocrisy.

Truly, Will was full of admiration for the Chesapeake Ripper. The beauty of his kills, how he elevated them into art.

The Ripper's method was strikingly similar across all three crimes. A brutal precision that spoke of a disturbed mind with a clear intent.

The killer wasn't just a predator; he was a sadist who delighted in the complete degradation of his victims. When the victims did finally take their last breath, it had been savored.

Yet the oddity among all three victims was the missing organs. Livers, hearts, lungs, intestines, spleens, kidneys, thymus, cuts of muscle from the chest wall.

The coroner's report was a grim catalog, listing every organ and muscle that had been meticulously removed.

It lay open before Will, the sterile language of the report stark against the gruesome reality it described. He stared at the words, trying to piece together the twisted logic that might explain why the killer had taken such specific pieces

What purpose did they serve?

What kind of person would collect such trophies, and what did they mean to him?

Each organ, each muscle, seemed to tell a part of the killer's story. The heart, lungs, ribs, each one a fragment of a macabre puzzle. Will considered the possibility that these pieces were more than just trophies; they were reminders, keepsakes of the killer's twisted

conquests. A tribute to the darkness that drove him, an offering to whatever twisted ideals he worshipped.

Perhaps they were a testament to something deeply personal, each organ serving as a symbol of his power, or a reflection of what he believed he was owed.

But why multiple organs?

The thought gnawed at Will.

Will’s thoughts spiraled, trying to make sense of a mind that seemed beyond comprehension.

Whatever the reason, the organs were more than just physical remnants. They were pieces of a much larger, much darker puzzle, a testament to the killer's obsession, his need to possess and control, to degrade his victims and elevate himself through their suffering.

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Fingers danced across the keys of the harpsichord, each note deliberate, resonating through the room in perfect harmony. The music was pristine, much like Hannibal’s hands.

Clean, steady, untainted by the chaos that swirled just outside their door.

He had noticed, of course, the police cars swarming the city, the faint whispers of horror carried on the faces of those who had witnessed the aftermath. The city was alive with fear, and Hannibal relished the contrast between the turbulence outside and the tranquil sanctuary within.

The music stopped, Hannibal contemplated for a moment. His fingers hovering over the keys before picking up his fountain pen. He added a few elegant strokes to the composition resting

on the stand, perfecting the next passage as if the music could somehow capture the events of the day in ways words never could.

After a moment, Hannibal resumed playing, starting again from the top of the page, each note filling the space with calculated precision. His mind worked as deftly as his hands, contemplating both the music and the intricacies of the human condition that had unfolded around him. Part of him wanted to capture it, and what better way than the harpsichord with it's crisp precise sound.

In the distance, the sound of the front door closing brought a small smile to his lips, though he didn't turn. Hannibal didn't need to. He could feel Will's presence as surely as he could sense the shift in the air. Will's steps were deliberate, his movements heavy with the weight of the day, the coat he hung with careful intent, and the long pause before entering the room, a pause that spoke volumes of the turmoil lingering just beneath the surface.

Hannibal continued to play, weaving Will's presence into the music with ease. He could feel the confusion emanating from Will, the subtle increase in his heartbeat, the way his scent reached Hannibal's nostrils, tinged with something dark and unmistakable.

Death. And something else. A lingering scent that stirred curiosity.

Hannibal's ears were attuned to more than just the music now. Will stood at the edge of the room, silent, watching, uncertain.

When Hannibal finally spoke, it was as if he had been waiting for the perfect moment to break the tension, his voice smooth and measured as he turned to face Will. The composition forgotten as his focus moved completely to Will.

"How was your day?" Hannibal asked, his gaze taking in every detail of Will's posture, the downturned lips, the way his eyes avoided direct contact.

Will looked troubled, the kind of trouble that settled deep, heavy, and unwilling to surface easily. Hannibal could sense the unspoken burden, the hesitation to share what weighed so heavily on him.

Will's mind was already racing, burdened by the horrific scenes he had undoubtedly encountered. His face carried the shadow of something unspeakable. And something else he was trying to hide, even from him.

Will remained silent for a moment, his gaze flickering toward Hannibal but never fully settling on him. There was a quiet battle within him, one Hannibal recognized all too well. The fight between what to share and what to keep buried.

Hannibal leaned back slightly, resting his hands on his lap as he waited with patience.

The scent of death still clung to Will, but Hannibal wasn't in a rush to strip the details from him.

Not yet.

"You don't have to hide it from me," Hannibal said softly, his eyes watching Will carefully, the predator's edge to his tone barely masked by the concern he allowed to slip through. "You can tell me anything, Will."

Will's breath hitched slightly, his eyes finally locking onto Hannibal's, but the weight in his chest remained. The horrors of the day lingered, and for a moment, it seemed as though Will was trapped between wanting to share his burden and knowing that the words wouldn't do justice to what he had seen.

"It was…" Will's voice was hoarse, almost hesitant, as if struggling to find the right words. "It was bad. Three victims. One was left in a church."

Hannibal raised a brow, pretending his interest was piqued. "A church?"

Will nodded, his expression darkening. “Sitting in the pew, the pages from his bible stuffed into a hollowed abdomen… like a sacrifice. The other… he was left in his own workshop, like some discarded thing. The one I got to see was sitting on a park bench.”

Hannibal studied him, his fingers lightly brushing the piano keys as if contemplating a response, though he already had a thousand possibilities spinning in his mind.

"Three bodies from one killer," Hannibal spoke, voice low.

"Each scene is more theatrical. Like he's building to something." Will added, his voice quieter, yet tense.

Will let out a slow, controlled breath, his eyes searching Hannibal’s face for something. Reassurance, perhaps, or understanding. But instead of giving Will what he needed, Hannibal stood, moving closer to him with the same deliberate grace as always. He reached out, gently cupping Will’s face in his hand, his thumb brushing over Will’s cheek.

"Death leaves its mark, Will," Hannibal whispered, his tone soft, though there was an edge of something darker beneath it.

Will closed his eyes at the touch, the warmth of Hannibal’s hand grounding him, though the storm inside him remained. He wanted to tell Hannibal more, about the emptiness he saw in those victims, the hollow, heartless display that echoed something he couldn’t quite place. But the words wouldn’t come. Not yet.

“It was beautiful, Hannibal.” Will finally admitted, his voice barely above a whisper, the exhaustion evident in every syllable. “Every detail was considered, from location to how they would be found.”

Hannibal’s eyes darkened, knowing as he leaned closer, his breath warm against Will’s ear. “You could see the beauty in the horror,” Hannibal murmured, his tone almost seductive.

There was no judgment in his words, only a quiet acknowledgment of the unspoken understanding of the art that lay beneath the brutality.

Will's breath hitched, his eyes closing briefly as Hannibal's words washed over him. He had fought so hard to resist the pull, to deny the part of him that could see what no other could. But now, in the quiet of the room, he couldn't escape the truth any longer.

There was beauty in the horror, in the precision of death, and it frightened him as much as it intrigued him.

"I don't want to see it that way," Will whispered, his voice barely audible. But even as he said it, he knew it was a lie.

Hannibal smiled softly, his hand brushing against Will's cheek, his touch both gentle and possessive. "And yet you do."

Will swallowed hard, unsure whether Hannibal's words were meant to comfort him or to push him deeper into the abyss he was already teetering on the edge of. Either way, he knew he was already too far gone to turn back.

"I don't want to see it that way," Will swallowed, falling to his knees.

Hannibal observed the way Will knelt before him, the subtle shift in his posture, the quiet submission in his body language. His sharp gaze caught the glint of gold in Will's eyes, and the omega's internal struggle was as palpable as the change in his scent.

There was an undeniable pull in Will, an attraction to the killer's work, to the grotesque beauty of it. And Hannibal recognized it instantly, that forbidden fascination that mirrored his own.

And Hannibal delighted in it.

"Do you believe that I would be displeased that you found beauty in this killer's victims?" Hannibal's voice was calm, yet laced with curiosity, as if he already knew the answer but wanted Will to admit it aloud.

He leaned closer, his fingers brushing lightly against Will's jaw, lifting his chin ever so slightly. Will's eyes remained averted, the shame of his own instincts weighing on him, as

though his admiration of the killer's art would somehow displease Hannibal.

But Hannibal wasn't displeased.

Quite the opposite.

He understood Will's struggle better than anyone else ever could. The connection Will felt to the killer's victims wasn't one of revulsion, it was an appreciation, an unspoken acknowledgment of the artistry in death.

It was the same instinct that had drawn Hannibal to Will from the beginning, the recognition of someone who could see beyond the surface of violence, who could understand its complexity, its dark beauty.

"Look at me, Will," Hannibal commanded softly, his voice gentle but firm.

Slowly, Will's eyes met his, the gold still flickering beneath the surface, his expression conflicted but yearning. Hannibal's lips curled into a knowing smile, his hand settling against Will's cheek, the touch both possessive and reassuring.

"There is no shame in seeing what others cannot," Hannibal murmured, his voice low and intoxicating. "You are drawn to it, as I am drawn to you."

"You're not… mad?" Will's voice was barely more than a breath, his eyes widening in stunned disbelief as he finally met Hannibal's gaze. The conflict within him was raw, his body tense as if bracing for the wrath he had anticipated.

Hannibal tilted his head, an amused smile playing on his lips as he studied Will's reaction.

The question seemed almost quaint to him, as if Will still didn't quite understand the depths of Hannibal's acceptance, the way their minds intertwined in ways no one else could

comprehend. He let the silence stretch for a moment, savoring the anticipation in Will's expression.

"Would you prefer that I was mad?" Hannibal asked, his voice smooth and measured, as though testing the waters of Will's own feelings.

He moved closer, his hand still resting on Will's cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over Will's skin. "Would it be easier for you if I lashed out? If I rejected the part of you that aligns with the darkness?"

Will's throat tightened as he swallowed, his mind spinning. He had expected judgment, expected to feel the weight of Hannibal's disapproval. But instead, there was nothing but calm understanding.

"I…" Will began, but the words seemed to slip away from him. He didn't know what to say, how to reconcile the guilt he felt with the acceptance that Hannibal was offering so freely.

Hannibal's smile softened as he leaned in, his breath warm against Will's ear. "You are drawn to the darkness, to the beauty in it. And I would never be angry at something that makes you unique."

Will exhaled shakily, his chest tight, the conflict within him loosening just slightly as Hannibal's words sank in. There was no anger, no rejection, only an invitation to accept the part of himself he had tried so hard to deny.

"And you… you don't mind that?" Will asked, his voice uncertain, as though he still struggled to believe that Hannibal could embrace his darkness as much as he did.

Hannibal's smile deepened, his eyes glinting with the same understanding that had always been there. "Not at all, my love," he whispered, his voice a promise. "I adore it."

"But..." Will's voice faltered, unable to fully accept the reassurance Hannibal offered. There was something deeper, something buried within him that resisted the idea of being accepted for the darkness that lived inside him.

Hannibal's eyes sharpened, and in that moment, he understood. It was about something much older, something rooted in Will's past. Hannibal could almost see it now, the way Will recoiled, not from fear of Hannibal's judgment, but from a deeper shame, a belief that he wasn't worthy of acceptance at all.

And suddenly, the pieces fell into place.

Hannibal's mind painted a vivid picture, one formed from small details and subtle cues. He could imagine the bruises on Will's body, the marks of a past inflicted by a father who had failed him. A man who had tried to beat the sensitivity out of Will, who saw his son's empathetic nature as a weakness to be punished, rather than nurtured. Hannibal could envision the pain Will had endured, not just physically but emotionally, as a child who was made to believe that the parts of him that made him different were something to be ashamed of.

Will's hesitation, the way he couldn't meet Hannibal's eyes when speaking of the beauty in the killer's work, it was all rooted in those childhood scars. The shame that had been ingrained in him by his father, the belief that anything outside of the norm, anything that set him apart, was wrong. Even now, as an adult, as someone who had come to terms with the darker parts of himself, Will still struggled with that early conditioning, still flinched at the thought of being truly seen.

Hannibal's heart darkened, not with anger toward Will, but with a cold, calculated hatred for the man who had hurt him, who had tried to crush the very essence of what made Will extraordinary.

"Will," Hannibal's voice softened, his hands moving to cradle Will's face, forcing him to meet his gaze. "What was done to you... the pain inflicted on you by your father... It has no place here."

Will's breath caught, his eyes wide with surprise, as though Hannibal had reached into the very heart of him and pulled out the truth he had kept buried for so long.

“You’re not flawed for seeing beauty where others see horror,” Hannibal continued, his tone steady, unyielding. “You are not wrong for feeling what you feel. You were never wrong. The shame you carry is not yours to bear.”

Will’s lips trembled as he stared at Hannibal, his mind racing, trying to process the weight of what he was hearing. It was too much, too raw, too exposed. But Hannibal’s hands were steady, his gaze unwavering, grounding Will in a way no one ever had before.

“You are not your father’s broken reflection,” Hannibal whispered, his thumb brushing gently over Will’s cheek. “You are something far more beautiful. And I adore every part of you.”

The words alone didn’t seem to reach the depths of Will’s conflict, the scars etched too deeply into his soul for mere reassurances to smooth over. Hannibal sensed the turmoil still raging inside Will, the self-doubt that refused to release its hold.

He considered a different approach, something more tangible, something that would anchor Will in the present, pulling him out of the emotional storm. Hannibal’s eyes darkened with intent, and his fingers, ever so gentle, moved to tilt Will’s chin upward. His thumb brushed over Will’s lips, a quiet command wrapped in an intimate gesture.

“Open,” Hannibal said, his voice low, and smooth, but leaving no room for hesitation. It was an invitation for Will to surrender, to let go of the shame, the fear, and the ghosts of his past. Will craved punishment, not as an act of cruelty, but as a way to receive his alpha’s acceptance.

Will’s breath hitched, the familiar mixture of tension and anticipation flooding his senses. He hesitated, his body caught between resisting and wanting, but the touch of Hannibal’s thumb on his lips grounded him. Slowly, almost tentatively, Will obeyed, his lips parting just enough to feel Hannibal’s presence fully.

Hannibal’s eyes gleamed with satisfaction as he leaned closer, his thumb slipping just inside, brushing the edge of Will’s teeth. His touch was firm yet tender, a reminder of the control he held, but also the protection he offered.

“You don’t have to carry this burden alone,” Hannibal murmured, his breath warm against Will’s skin, fingers caressing his face with possessive care. “Let me take it from you, piece by piece.”

Will's heart pounded in his chest, the vulnerability of the moment nearly overwhelming. But as he looked up into Hannibal's eyes, dark, patient, and unwavering, he felt something inside him begin to unravel. He didn’t need to fight anymore, didn’t need to prove anything to anyone. Not to his father. Not to the world. Not even to himself.

He was Hannibal's.

And that was enough.

It was easy to feel Will suck on his thumb, to watch eyes close and a gentle hum.

Hannibal reached down, undoing his fly before he edged forward, legs splayed and letting Will in.

“Open,” Hannibal spoke again, quieter, taking his thumb away as Will did as asked. Hannibal was flaccid, gently placing himself in Will’s open waiting mouth, watching lips close around him as Will then waited for a command.

Hannibal’s lips curled into a small, satisfied smile, his other hand resting lightly on Will’s shoulder. “Good,” he whispered, feeling the warmth of Will’s mouth around his cock, the soft graze of teeth barely noticeable. It wasn’t about the act itself, it was about control, the quiet submission that Will offered him, unspoken but present in every breath, every glance.

“You may warm me as I finish my piece,” Hannibal spoke, attention turning back to the harpsichord as he began to play.

Each swallow from Will pulled on him, a tickle of his mate's tongue as Hannibal let fingers dance over the keys.

Will became distant with each minute, settling between Hannibal's open legs as his eyes closed.

It was only broken when Hannibal finished.

Hannibal's fingers gently brushed over Will's cheek, almost tender in their touch. " Will," he continued, his eyes dark and unreadable, "understanding is not weakness. It is a gift."

Will's brows furrowed slightly, a flicker of confusion crossing his face. He couldn't quite understand. He had done as Hannibal asked, submitted to his command, but there had been no reciprocation.

No physical need satisfied for Hannibal, no tangible exchange.

"Hannibal," Will began, his voice quiet, uncertain. "You got nothing from it."

Hannibal, ever calm, regarded Will with a patient smile, his hand still resting lightly against Will's face. "You believe I received nothing?" he asked softly, tilting his head. The question wasn't mocking, but it was layered with meaning, as if Will was missing something far deeper.

Will's confusion only deepened. He searched Hannibal's face for answers, not understanding why his submission had been enough. For him, the act seemed incomplete. There had been no physical satisfaction for Hannibal, no culmination of desire.

Hannibal's fingers moved once more, brushing along Will's jaw with deliberate care. "You misunderstand," Hannibal said, his voice carrying that measured weight of control and affection. "The gift of your submission, your willingness to give yourself over completely, that is what I received."

Will's breath caught, the realization slowly dawning on him. Hannibal's satisfaction wasn't rooted in the physical, it was in the control, the power, and the quiet surrender Will had offered. To Hannibal, that was the truest expression of devotion, more fulfilling than any fleeting pleasure.

Hannibal leaned in closer, his eyes locking onto Will's, holding him in place. "The power you give me is more meaningful than any act, and you give it so beautifully." he whispered, his lips brushing just above Will's ear. "I do not need anything more than that. You, Will, are enough."

Hannibal adjusted his clothing with his usual meticulous care, his movements calm and deliberate. Once satisfied, he extended a hand to Will, his expression unreadable but carrying the same composed authority that always seemed to radiate from him.

"Would you care for some dinner?" Hannibal asked, his voice smooth, as though nothing unusual had just transpired between them. The shift from the intimacy of moments ago to the simple, almost domestic offer was seamless, but that was Hannibal's nature,he controlled the space between them.

Will blinked, still processing the exchange. His body felt light, almost unmoored as if the line between submission and something deeper had blurred in a way that left him vulnerable.

Yet, there was something grounding in the casualness of Hannibal's offer, a return to the familiar rhythm they had established.

He glanced at Hannibal's outstretched hand, a fleeting moment of hesitation before taking it. "Yeah," Will murmured, allowing Hannibal to pull him to his feet. "Dinner sounds good."

As Will stood, Hannibal's grip was firm but gentle, guiding him without forcing. There was no need for further explanation or reassurance.

Hannibal moved to the fridge, taking out a strip of tongue from John Bryan and some butter.

“A delicate *Langue de Bœuf* , slow-braised in a reduction of red wine and herbs, served with a velvety shallot purée and a hint of truffle oil.” Hannibal announced, smiling at Will.

“Do you need me to grab the herbs?” Will leaned against the counter he had made, hand running over it as he smiled to himself.

“Some thyme and rosemary would be splendid,” Hannibal spoke, humming to himself as he watched Will leave the kitchen, returning a moment later with a stronger scent of slick in the air.

Chapter End Notes

These guys live in my brain rent free, send help!

But hope you all enjoy it, getting to a big section soon and I'm so excited!

Chapter 10

News of the murders had spread like wildfire, every paper printing its own interpretation of the killer’s methods, feeding the public’s morbid curiosity.

The name "Chesapeake Ripper" now echoed in every corner of the city, with headlines screaming it in bold letters and TV broadcasts dissecting every grisly detail of the case.

Hannibal could feel a swell of pride blooming in his chest each time the name was uttered.

It wasn’t just the attention that pleased him; it was the subtle hand that had crafted it.

He knew the name's origin, a whisper carried from Will's lips, spoken unintentionally, but with a precision that delighted Hannibal.

Will, of course, hadn’t expected the name to stick. He had uttered in frustration the first time he’d heard the name being used. Admiring that he’d spoken it at the crime scene.

But Hannibal had recognized its significance immediately.

Will had unwittingly named him.

The thought alone sent a shiver of dark satisfaction down Hannibal’s spine.

His Will, his omega, without even realizing it, had bestowed upon him a title that would forever bind them together.

Not “Il Mostro” or some other clumsy reference to a mythical creature or abstract monster that other killers might have been named after. Uttered by men who held no respect for the killer they hunted.

No, Will had chosen something far more deliberate, more human.

The name was not sensational or otherworldly, but starkly grounded in reality, highlighting Hannibal's qualities, his precision, his intellect, and his ability to exist within society unnoticed.

It was a name that captured the essence of what Hannibal did, not simply kill, but dissect, craft, and transform his victims into something more than just corpses.

Will, of course, hadn’t meant to create this lasting legacy.

Hannibal suspected Will still struggled with the weight of it, the knowledge that his choice of words had helped define the Ripper’s image.

Yet, to Hannibal, it was poetic, a moment of unintentional brilliance that only made his connection to Will even deeper.

As Hannibal read the articles, he felt a quiet thrill course through him. It was as if, in that single act, Will had unknowingly accepted his place in this symphony of death and creation.

In the stillness of his study, Hannibal allowed himself a rare smile, the corners of his lips lifting in quiet satisfaction. Will had named him. And, in return, Hannibal would ensure that Will would never forget it.

“Aren’t you writing your paper?” Will asked, his voice tight as his glare fixed on the newspaper in front of Hannibal.

Hannibal's sharp gaze didn’t miss the way Will’s eyes flicked to the headline. The Chesapeake Ripper, bold, inescapable. It hung between them, like a third presence in the room.

Will's lips pressed into a thin, tense line, and his shoulders stiffened as if the weight of the name rested on them. His jaw clenched, barely containing his frustration, the sense of responsibility he carried.

Hannibal allowed himself a small, indulgent smile. “I’ll get to it,” he replied smoothly, folding the paper with deliberate care. “But I find myself distracted.”

Will’s eyes remained on the paper, as if willing it to disappear, as though it were the source of all his frustration. “That name,” Will muttered, “It’s like everyone’s feeding into his ego. Making him into something bigger than he is.”

“Perhaps,” Hannibal murmured. His voice was soft but knowing, a thread of amusement coloring the edges of his tone. “But do you really believe the name doesn’t suit him? Or perhaps… you resent how much truth there is in it?”

Will’s eyes shot up to meet Hannibal’s, stormy and unsettled. He swallowed hard, as if grappling with the thoughts swirling in his head. “I didn’t mean for it to stick.”

“And yet, it has.” Hannibal’s smile deepened. “A name, like a work of art, can take on a life of its own. But remember, Will, it is not the name that gives the Ripper power. It is the fear behind it.”

Will's frustration simmered under the surface, but Hannibal’s words wrapped around him like a soothing balm, pulling him closer. Will shook his head, clearly struggling with the unintended consequences of his choice.

“You’re not to blame for their fascination,” Hannibal said gently, watching Will slowly come closer. “You see him for what he is. Others only see the myth.”

Will’s gaze dropped, the tension slowly seeping out of him, though the storm behind his eyes never fully cleared. “I just hate that it’s become… this.”

“And yet, you gave him that name,” Hannibal added, his voice like silk, laced with something only Will could hear, the pride, the unspoken bond. “Whether you meant to or not.”

Will exhaled, long and heavy, but he didn’t pull away. He stayed, as though Hannibal’s words, his presence, were the only things tethering him to some semblance of calm.

Even now, Hannibal’s admiration for Will lingered just beneath the surface. It was inevitable, this connection between them, even if Will couldn’t yet see it fully.

“You named him, Will,” Hannibal murmured. “And in a way, that binds you to him. Whether you like it or not.”

Will’s expression darkened, his hands flexing at his sides as he struggled to keep his emotions in check. “Allure? It's going to stroke the Ripper's ego. Give him exactly what he wants, recognition. The media is obsessing over him, and he’ll only feel more powerful.”

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with something almost like amusement, though his tone remained gentle. “Perhaps. But it’s inevitable, Will. When someone displays such... skill, it captures the public’s imagination. Fear is a powerful tool, and a name gives that fear shape. It gives them something to hold onto.”

Will shook his head, pacing the room in frustration. “That’s what bothers me. It shouldn’t be about feeding into his ego, about glorifying him. Every article, every mention of that name just makes it worse. It’s like he’s becoming something more than a killer,he’s becoming a legend.”

“What the Ripper wants, Will, is irrelevant to what you are doing. Your work, your pursuit of him, is not about feeding his desires. It’s about bringing him to justice. And no matter what name he carries, he cannot escape that.” Hannibal spoke calmly.

Will’s gaze snapped to Hannibal, his eyes searching for something, some reassurance that he wasn’t losing control of the situation. “I just hate that we’re making him out to be something grand. It feels wrong, like we’re giving him exactly what he wants.”

“Fear has always had a way of immortalizing those who wield it well. The Ripper is simply playing a part in a larger narrative, one that has existed long before this killer. But I understand your concern.” But deep down, Hannibal savored the unfolding narrative, watching with quiet satisfaction as his work, and his name, began to leave its mark on the world.

Will exhaled slowly, the tension in his body lessening, though not disappearing entirely. “I just don’t want him to win,” he said, his voice quieter now, more resigned. The conflict within him simmered just beneath the surface, clear in the way his shoulders hunched slightly and the way his eyes averted from Hannibal’s intense gaze.

But Hannibal, ever the keen observer, could see more. He saw the way Will's words and emotions didn’t quite align. The way the Ripper, he, had already nestled deep within Will, like a thorn wrapping around his heart, twisting painfully with every breath Will took.

It was there, that reluctant but undeniable connection, as twisted and complicated as love. And like love, it made Will bleed, made him ache.

“Don’t you?” Hannibal asked softly, his voice coaxing, almost gentle. He knew the answer, even if Will hadn’t fully accepted it yet. The truth he spoke not that long ago on his knees at Hannibal’s feet.

Will’s eyes flickered with doubt, his lips parting to respond, but no words came out at first. Then, quietly, “No.” It was a denial, but it lacked conviction. His pout, slight but present, was both defiant and uncertain, as though he were trying to convince himself as much as Hannibal. “You know what I mean.”

Hannibal’s lips curved into a knowing smile.

Of course, he knew.

Will's job, his purpose, was to catch the Ripper, to bring justice, to make the world a safer place. It was the moral duty he was bound to, the path he had chosen to walk.

But that wasn't the full truth.

Hannibal knew the darker side of Will, the one he tried to keep hidden beneath layers of guilt and responsibility.

Because Will adored the Ripper's work. He had confessed as much to Hannibal, late at night, when the mask had slipped just enough. He had admitted the admiration, the strange allure of the killings, the artistry behind the horror. Will saw beauty where others saw only grotesque brutality. And Hannibal knew that this was where the bond between him and Will truly lay, in the shared understanding of what others could never see.

Will's fingers curled slightly at his sides, and he shifted, unable to fully reconcile the contradictions inside him. "It's not—" He paused, searching for the right words. "It's not that simple."

Hannibal's gaze softened, though the intensity never left his eyes. He stepped closer to Will, the air between them charged with a quiet, unspoken understanding. "You are drawn to him, Will. Not just because it is your duty to catch him, but because you see the truth in his work. You see the beauty."

Will's breath hitched, and for a moment, he couldn't meet Hannibal's gaze. "I don't want to," he whispered, but the admission came out strained, as though he were fighting something far deeper than his own desire for justice.

"And yet," Hannibal continued, his voice a low purr, "you do."

Will swallowed hard, torn between what he knew he should feel and the darker, more compelling urges that Hannibal knew all too well. He didn't want the Ripper to win, but some part of him, however small, couldn't help but marvel at his victory.

Hannibal's voice was soft yet commanding, every word deliberate. "You are the only person intelligent enough to catch this killer, Will. I have every faith in you."

The weight of Hannibal's words settled over Will like a heavy cloak. The praise, coming from someone as brilliant as Hannibal, should have been a comfort. But instead, it felt like a double-edged sword, cutting through his doubt and fueling the very conflict within him. He wanted to be the one to stop the Ripper, to put an end to the violence, but the lingering question gnawed at him—did he *really* want to?

Will's gaze flicked to Hannibal's, searching his eyes for something more. Hannibal's face, as always, was a mask of control, but there was something in the way he spoke that made Will's chest tighten. There was pride there, admiration even. It was intoxicating, but it also terrified him.

"I don't know if I'm the right person for this," Will admitted, voice strained with uncertainty. "What if… what if I can't?"

Hannibal stepped closer, his presence commanding yet oddly soothing. "You can. You understand this killer on a level no one else does. It's why you're the only one who can stop him." His gaze bore into Will's, unflinching and resolute. "You see what others refuse to see. And that, Will, makes you indispensable."

Will wanted to argue, wanted to push back against Hannibal's unwavering confidence. But a part of him—a dangerous, dark part—knew Hannibal was right. The connection he felt to the Ripper wasn't something he could easily explain away. He *did* understand him, far too well.

"You just have to let go of the fear," Hannibal continued, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "The fear that you are like him. Because that fear, Will, is what blinds you. Embrace it, and the answer will come."

Will's breath caught in his throat. He felt exposed, as if Hannibal had peeled back every layer of his psyche, leaving his rawest emotions laid bare. He didn't want to acknowledge the truth in what Hannibal was saying, but he couldn't deny it either.

"I'll catch him," Will said, more to himself than to Hannibal, as though he needed to convince himself that it was possible.

Hannibal's lips curved into a small smile, his eyes gleaming. "Of that, I have no doubt."

-

Will stood at the edge of the crime scene, the distant hum of police chatter and the flash of camera lights barely registering in his mind. His eyes scanned the scene before him, taking in the slumped body, the scattered viscera, the way the limbs were arranged in a desperate attempt to mimic something more sophisticated.

It was an imitation, a crude, hollow mockery of the Ripper's work.

There was no art here, no elegance in the way the body had been broken.

The Ripper had always crafted his scenes with precision, every cut, every placement meticulously thought out to send a message.

But this?

This was chaos, an amateur's attempt to shock and horrify without truly understanding what they were doing. No precsion in their cuts or arrangements.

Will felt a sinking disappointment settle in his chest.

The beauty of a masterpiece that he had come to both dread and respect in the Ripper's murders.

It wasn't beautiful.

It wasn't a puzzle to solve.

It was just another mess to clean up.

He crouched down beside the body, noting the jagged cuts that marred the victim's skin. The killer had tried to make it look deliberate, but Will could see the hesitation in the strokes, the way the blade had slipped in places.

It was rushed, frantic, as though the killer wanted to make a statement but didn't know how to convey it properly. They likely cut their own hand in the process. No understanding of how to weld a knife. Or where to strike.

Will's fingers twitched at his side, itching to retreat from the scene.

His mind drifted back to the true elegance of the Ripper's work, the careful removal of organs, the symbolism in the displays. Will wanted to be back in the office looking through the vase files instead of making a new profile.

There had been a dark beauty in those murders, a perverse sense of purpose that set them apart from the senseless violence of this imitation.

"Not him," Will muttered under his breath, standing up and brushing his hands against his jeans. The detective beside him glanced over, eyebrow raised in question, but Will didn't elaborate.

He didn’t need to. He knew this wasn’t the Ripper. It wasn’t even close. Even Dave knew as he stood on the edge and watched.

As he turned to leave, Dave came over, pulling Will aside.

“It’s a copycat. Do you think there will be more bodies?” Dave asked quietly, his badge glinting in the low light.

The officers around the scene glanced over, waiting for Dave to issue orders.

“Maybe,” Will said, his voice flat, “but they’re injured. It might take a few days.”

“We don’t have a few days,” Dave muttered, frustration creeping into his tone. “The Ripper case is making national news. It won’t be long before the feds step in and take over.”

The thought made Will’s stomach churn. “The Ripper’s a psychopath. There’s no discernible motive, no reason to take the organs. It’s about control, not revenge.”

“I’m not letting the feds swoop in and steal credit after we’ve done all the legwork,” Dave snapped.

Will shook his head, scanning the scene again. “Whoever this killer is, they knew the victim. A friend, a co-worker—someone they felt wronged by. This was personal. They admire the Ripper, but once they started, it wasn’t what they imagined. They wanted to replicate the fear, the awe, but...”

He trailed off, his disappointment thick in the air as he turned to leave, the sense of failure weighing heavy.

Dave watched him for a moment before turning back to the other officers and detectives. “Get everything you can on the victim,” he ordered quietly.

As Will walked away, the emptiness settled deeper, the nagging feeling that this wasn't the end, but merely a hollow imitation of something far more dangerous.

A perverse plagiarism of a master.

-

"Amanda, it's wonderful to see you again." Hannibal greeted smoothly as he moved forward, placing a delicate kiss on Amanda's cheek before stepping back, his hand resting at the small of Will's back. "Allow me to introduce my mate, Will."

Amanda's eyes sparkled with curiosity as they landed on Will. "Delightful to meet you," she said with a knowing smile, before turning to Donald. "You haven't told me how the two of them met."

Donald let out a chuckle, lifting his hands in mock surrender. "Something about Hannibal buying a boat and winding up with Will instead."

Hannibal, ever composed, smiled slightly at the remark, while Will flushed.

"Shall we?" Hannibal gestured towards the restaurant's entrance, holding the door open for them. The waiter appeared promptly, guiding them to their table. Amanda and Donald took their seats, and as Hannibal pulled out a chair for Will, Will caught Amanda's amused glance.

Settling into his own seat after Will, Hannibal adjusted his cuffs with calm precision, his tone as elegant as ever. "I must apologize for not arranging this dinner sooner."

Donald, ever the conversationalist, leaned forward with a grin. "So, Will, how are you handling all of Hannibal's grand social engagements? He does have a penchant for throwing

these elaborate dinners.”

The waiter poured wine, Will still felt the flush on his cheeks from the way Amanda and Donald observed them, especially the way Hannibal quietly yet firmly showcased Will as someone precious, like a prized artifact.

Amanda smiled warmly at Will, but there was a glint of curiosity in her eyes, as if she were already piecing together the story in her mind. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Will," she said, her voice smooth but with the unmistakable hint of intrigue. "I must admit, I've been dying to know how you two came together. A boat, you say?"

Donald cleared his throat, giving Amanda a knowing look. “Yes, a boat. Hannibal always finds the most… unexpected treasures when he’s on the hunt.”

Will noticed Amanda stomp lightly on Donald's foot under the table, an unspoken reprimand for his teasing. Donald winced but smiled, rubbing his foot while throwing a playful glance her way. The gesture only served to deepen Will's embarrassment.

Hannibal’s lips curled into a small smile. "Indeed. Will is perhaps the most treasured discovery of all."

Hannibal knew Amanda was an omega, like Will, but from a much more elite family. Her upbringing had been one of opulence, discipline, and expectations, worlds away from Will’s. Donald had been set up by the family, a forced bond. Yert over the years it had begun to wane. It was not from love, or feelings. The bond was simply for money and status.

Hannibal knew this well. It was evident in the small gestures between Amanda and Donald, the forced smiles, the subtle way they leaned away from one another rather than toward.

Donald still tried, though. He played the role of the devoted husband, going out of his way to please her and maintain the appearance of harmony. But Hannibal could see the cracks. He always could.

As Amanda smiled and laughed at Donald’s jokes, Hannibal caught the flicker of interest in her eyes when they rested on him. Her gaze lingered a little too long on his hands, the sharp cut of his suit, the way his every movement seemed so deliberate, so powerful. There was a quiet tension in the air, one that Amanda likely didn’t even fully understand herself, but Hannibal did.

Amanda’s intrigue was undeniable. With her high-society background, had been brought up to want the very best, to admire power in all its forms. And Hannibal, with his refined tastes and his aura of control, exuded the kind of dominance that drew people in.

He felt Will shift beside him, perhaps sensing the underlying currents as well. Will was attuned to these things, even if he wouldn’t voice them. Hannibal’s thumb brushed lightly against the back of Will’s hand under the table, a silent reassurance. Will’s place by Hannibal’s side was secure, regardless of the subtle attention Amanda was paying him.

Will's blush deepened, the heat rising to his cheeks, making it impossible to hide his embarrassment. Amanda, perceptive as ever, watched the exchange with a soft laugh. "Well, I’d say Hannibal’s found himself quite the match. And it’s always a pleasure to see someone so… adored. Someone who complements you so well, Hannibal."

Donald laughed half heartedly. "So, Will, how are you managing with all of Hannibal’s grand social engagements? Is throwing elaborate dinners going to become a habit?"

Will shifted slightly in his seat, not entirely sure how to answer. “It’s... a new experience for me,” he admitted, glancing at Hannibal, who offered him a reassuring smile. “No doubt he is planning his next dinner party.”

“Always.” Hannibal leaned forward, resting a hand lightly on Will’s. “Will is adapting beautifully,” he said, his voice filled with pride. “And I assure you, he brings his own elegance to any event.”

Amanda’s eyes sparkled at the compliment. As Amanda leaned in to ask another question, her voice lowered as if trying to create a sense of intimacy, Hannibal allowed himself a small, knowing smile.

"Donald," Hannibal said smoothly, effortlessly shifting the focus of the conversation. "Have you seen the latest exhibit at the museum? I believe it would suit Amanda's tastes perfectly."

Donald seized the opportunity, eager to steer Amanda's attention away, and Hannibal glanced at Will, catching his quiet sigh of relief. Amanda's interest in him, while subtle, was unmistakable. But Will had nothing to worry about.

Hannibal's hand rested on the back of Will's chair, a gesture of possession, of protection, as the evening continued. No matter the subtle flirtations or lingering gazes, Hannibal's heart belonged to the man at his side.

"How is your paper coming along?" Donald asked, taking a sip of his wine, his tone casual but genuinely curious. "What was it called again? The psychology of exclusion within social circles?"

Hannibal's lips curved into a measured smile. "The Origins of Social Exclusion," he corrected with a touch of pride.

Beside him, Will beamed, squeezing Hannibal's hand beneath the table, his voice warm with admiration. "I have no doubt the article will be published."

Donald let out a hearty laugh, setting his glass down. "Well, it wouldn't be the first time he's made it into a journal." He glanced at Amanda, reminiscing. "I remember our first year in residency together. Hannibal was still in the emergency department. He published an article about reducing blood loss during surgery by making smaller, more precise incisions. It was the talk of the hospital for weeks."

Amanda raised her eyebrows, impressed. "That must have been quite the breakthrough."

Hannibal inclined his head modestly. "It was merely an exploration of efficiency in practice, reducing trauma to the body where possible. Every second counts when saving a life."

Will couldn't help but glance at Hannibal, admiration clear in his eyes. He knew firsthand the depth of Hannibal's intellect and the care he put into every detail, whether in medicine or any other aspect of life. Hannibal was methodical, precise, and brilliant.

"Hannibal's nearly finished his residency," Will said quietly, his tone more modest, yet full of admiration. "He's put in so much hard work, balancing psychiatry with pulling extra shifts in surgery when they needed him. It's been a lot, but he always manages to stay focused and dedicated to whatever he's doing."

Will glanced at Hannibal, a hint of pride in his eyes. "He doesn't talk about it much, but it's been impressive to see him handle both with such devotion." Will looked back, leaning in a little closer to show Amanda who Hannibal belonged to.

"As fortunate as I am to have already been employed by the hospital, my psychiatry internship was significantly shorter than my first residency," Hannibal remarked, his voice as smooth as the wine in his glass. He leaned back slightly in his chair, his demeanor composed as ever. "The hospital was gracious enough to allow me to transition smoothly from the emergency department to psychiatry. The experience was invaluable, of course, but I must admit, having been there previously gave me a certain advantage."

Donald nodded in agreement. "It's a good position to be in. You've already established yourself, made connections."

"Indeed," Hannibal replied. "And now, with my residency nearly complete, my plans extend beyond the hospital. For now, I'll continue working there, refining my methods, but eventually…" He paused, glancing at Will with a thoughtful expression before continuing. "I plan to open my own private practice. A more intimate setting, where I can focus deeply on select patients."

Amanda, intrigued, leaned forward slightly. "A private practice? That sounds prestigious. You'll have full control over your cases."

Hannibal smiled. "Control is not the goal, but rather the ability to provide the most meticulous care possible. Psychiatry is a delicate field. The more focused the environment, the more effective the treatment."

“Knowing you, I imagine your practice will be highly sought after,” Donald added, swirling his wine. “You’ve always had a knack for precision.”

Hannibal inclined his head, his gaze shifting momentarily to Will. “It’s not just about precision. It’s about understanding the intricacies of the human mind, something I find endlessly fascinating.” He glanced at Will, his eyes softening. “And something I plan to continue exploring.”

Donald chuckled, shaking his head as he took another sip of his wine. "I have to admit," he began, his laughter subsiding into a more casual grin, "I’m more interested in the mechanics of the brain than in psychology. The real intrigue for me is what happens when the brain starts to break down, you know? All those tiny misfires, the structural damage—that's what fascinates me."

He leaned forward slightly, gesturing with his glass. "Psychiatry is important, don’t get me wrong, but I’m all about the physical aspects. Understanding how the brain itself falls apart."

Hannibal’s eyes twinkled with amusement. "Neurosurgery does allow for a more tangible approach to the mind. I can see why you’re drawn to that."

Amanda leaned forward with a playful smile, her eyes glinting with curiosity. “So, Hannibal,” she began, resting her chin on her hand, “now that you’re almost finished with your residency, does that mean you’ll be throwing one of your famous dinner parties to celebrate that I’ve heard so much about?”

Hannibal returned Amanda’s gaze with a slight smile. “That’s certainly an idea worth considering,” he replied smoothly. “I do enjoy marking important occasions with a proper gathering. Perhaps something intimate, yet suitably grand, to honor the end of this chapter.”

Amanda raised her glass in anticipation. “I’ll be waiting for the invitation, then.”

Donald laughed, clinking his glass with hers. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world. You should have seen what he created the last time, while I wasn’t there, the lunch you bought was delightful.”

Amanda raised an eyebrow as she took a delicate sip of her wine. “And what about you, Will? Will you be joining us for this grand celebration, or will the police station keep you too busy?” Her tone was casual, though there was an undercurrent of assumption, as if she believed Will’s role at the station was something trivial, perhaps clerical. It was unusual to see an omega in the force afterall.

Will shifted slightly in his seat, feeling the weight of her gaze. “I—... well, I’ve been pretty tied up lately,” he began, trying to downplay his involvement. “Mostly assisting with investigations.”

Hannibal, however, was quick to correct the misconception, his voice smooth but firm. “Will isn’t just assisting with any investigation,” Hannibal interjected, placing a steadying hand on Will’s arm. “He’s helping with the homicide division, particularly with the newest case. The Chesapeake Ripper. He’s been invaluable in creating the psychological profile of the killer.”

Amanda’s eyes widened slightly, clearly surprised by the revelation. “The Ripper?” she echoed, her interest piqued. “I didn’t realize you were working on something so… high profile.”

Will looked down. “It’s really not that—”

“Will’s being humble,” Hannibal cut in smoothly, his voice laced with quiet pride. “His work has been crucial. He’s helping to save lives and bring justice to the victims. His role is far more important than he gives himself credit for.”

Amanda blinked, a newfound respect flickering in her eyes. “Well, that’s… quite something,” she admitted. “I had no idea.” She gave Will a warm smile, as if reassessing him in a new light.

Donald, listening intently, added, “You must have your hands full, then. That’s no small task.”

Will nodded, still uncomfortable with the attention, but he could feel the reassuring pressure of Hannibal’s hand. The contrast between Amanda’s initial assumption and Hannibal’s unwavering support made Will’s heart swell, even if he was hesitant to embrace the praise.

Will smiled, trying to shift the attention away from himself. "I'd rather hear more about Hannibal as a resident," he said, glancing over at his partner. "He’s barely told me anything about his time in medicine."

Donald leaned forward with a broad smile. “Oh, trust me, there’s a lot to tell,” he said. “Hannibal’s time as a resident was nothing short of impressive. He worked himself to the bone, but it always seemed like he was two steps ahead of everyone else. I remember during our first year, we’d be running on fumes, but Hannibal? He’d be calmly reading some obscure journal article between surgeries.”

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, clearly amused by Donald’s recounting. “I assure you, I wasn’t the only one putting in extra shifts.”

“No, but you were the only one who looked like you enjoyed it,” Donald retorted with a laugh.

Will squeezed Hannibal’s hand, looking up at him with a quiet admiration. “He never tells me about any of this.”

“That’s because there’s little to tell,” Hannibal said smoothly, though his expression softened as he met Will’s gaze.

“You were always one of the best,” Donald said, raising his glass to Hannibal. “No doubt about it.”

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, acknowledging the compliment, but his attention remained on Will. “I’ve been fortunate,” he said quietly. “But what matters most now is moving forward, to continue my work and, perhaps, one day open my own practice.”

Will smiled again, grateful that the conversation had shifted away from his own work. “You’ve earned it,” he said softly, his admiration for Hannibal clear in his voice.

Donald leaned back in his chair, swirling his wine thoughtfully before looking at Hannibal with a curious glint in his eyes. “I’ve always wondered, Hannibal,” he began, setting the glass down. “You were doing so well in surgery,precise, calm under pressure, the highest success rate. What made you switch to psychiatry?”

The question hung in the air, drawing the attention of both Amanda and Will, who glanced at Hannibal with equal interest. Will, especially, had always been curious but had never asked directly. It wasn’t like Hannibal to discuss his own decisions unless prompted.

Hannibal took a moment before answering, his gaze steady as he regarded Donald. “Surgery is an art form in its own right,” he said, his voice as measured as always. “But I found myself drawn more to the complexities of the mind. The human psyche is a deeper, more intricate landscape to navigate. While surgery allowed me to heal the body, psychiatry offers a way to understand and, heal the mind.”

He paused, glancing at Will with a subtle, meaningful smile. “There’s a certain art to understanding human behavior, what motivates people, what drives them. It’s a more profound exploration than I could ever achieve in surgery.”

Amanda nodded, clearly intrigued. “It’s a different kind of precision, isn’t it? Understanding why someone thinks or acts the way they do.”

Hannibal inclined his head. “Precisely. And in psychiatry, you aren't just dealing with the physical, you’re uncovering layers of thought, emotion, and trauma. It’s a challenge, but one that I find deeply rewarding.”

Will listened quietly, absorbing Hannibal's words with newfound understanding. It made sense, now more than ever, why Hannibal had transitioned from something as tactile as surgery to the psychological nuances of psychiatry. He wasn't just looking to heal wounds, he wanted to understand the intricacies behind the invisible ones.

Donald nodded, his curiosity satisfied. "I guess that makes sense. Surgery's rewarding in its own way, but I can see how psychiatry would offer something more... layered."

Hannibal smiled, a glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes as he tilted head slightly. "In a way. The mind holds far more complexities than any organ I've operated on. It offers endless possibilities for exploration, understanding why we do the things we do, what drives us, what makes us human." He glanced at Will, his gaze softening for just a moment.

As the waiter approached with their meals, the conversation around the table quieted, everyone's attention shifting to the elegantly plated dishes being set in front of them. The rich aroma of seared meat and delicate herbs filled the air, mingling with the scent of wine and candlelight.

Will couldn't help but miss Hannibal's cooking as he looked at his plate, though his appetite had been dulled by the weight of the evening's conversation.

"To new beginnings," Hannibal began, his deep, resonant voice capturing their attention effortlessly. "To the culmination of hard work, of perseverance through adversity. To the next chapter in our lives, be it in medicine, in justice, or in the quiet moments we share with those closest to us." His gaze settled on Will as he continued, "And to the bonds we forge that make the journey worth it."

Will felt the weight of Hannibal's words, the subtle intimacy of the toast not lost on him. He raised his glass a little higher, meeting Hannibal's eyes with a soft smile.

"To new beginnings," they echoed, glasses clinking in unison.

The toast lingered in the air as they each took a sip of their wine, the moment charged with a quiet sense of importance.

As the conversation shifted back to lighter topics and the sound of silverware against plates filled the room, Will couldn't shake the warmth he felt from Hannibal's words. The devotion from his alpha and admiration.

-

Will's dreams were never kind to him. Even since he was a boy, his nights had been haunted by twisted phantoms and disjointed visions.

The nightmares that plagued him now were vivid and cruel, reflecting the chaos and darkness that lurked beneath the surface of his mind.

His dreams were a brutal landscape, a foreboding forest where the gnarled, skeletal trees stretched their twisted branches skyward, blotting out the stars.

The air was heavy, the silence oppressive, broken only by the occasional rustle of unseen creatures. The only light in this grim place flickered from deep within the woods, casting long shadows and creating the illusion of movement just beyond his vision.

Will pressed forward, the brambles and branches clawing at his skin, tearing at his clothes as though the forest itself resisted his passage. But he moved faster, driven by a fierce determination to reach the center of this nightmarish realm. He could feel something waiting for him there—something he needed to confront.

Suddenly, the ground beneath him gave way, and he stumbled into a clearing.

He landed heavily, the damp earth beneath him cold and slick, the unmistakable scent of decay rising from the wet soil.

The oppressive weight of the forest lingered, but for the first time, he had space to breathe.

Will’s heart pounded in his chest as he stood in the eerie clearing, the damp ground beneath him cold and unforgiving. The red-stained earth seemed to pulse with a sinister life of its own, reflecting the dread that gnawed at his insides.

An eerie, high-pitched screech pierced the stillness of the woods, sending a chill down Will's spine. His head snapped toward the source.

The faint light that had beckoned him deeper into the fores came from candles illuminating elaborate table, draped in tattered, decaying cloth, yet somehow still grand in its arrangement.

Upon it lay a feast, glorious in appearance but unsettling in its stillness. Rotten carcasses, fruit and vegetables were placed with beautiful floral arrangements.

Around the table sat skeletal figures, their hollow, unseeing eyes locked on Will, as though they had been waiting for him.

They were dressed in tattered suits, once elegant but now ravaged by time. The fabric was moth-eaten, with dark stains creeping across the cloth like old wounds.

Their silent, unblinking stares making Will’s skin crawl.

At the far end of the table, a chair remained empty, conspicuously vacant.

Will couldn’t explain why, but a compulsion tugged at him, urging him forward. His legs carried him without thought, his steps slow and deliberate.

The air felt thicker as he approached the seat. With a strange sense of inevitability, he sank into the chair, as if it had been made just for him.

No sooner had he sat down that vines, thin and

twisted, began to slither up from the ground. They wrapped themselves tightly around his arms and legs, binding him to the chair, their touch cold and unyielding.

He struggled briefly but quickly realized it was futile. The skeletal figures around the table remained motionless, their eyeless gazes still fixed on him.

The table was adorned with fine china, gleaming cutlery, with plates that were now empty in front of each guest.

At the head of the table, opposite Will, a figure materialized from the shadows. The shape of a man swirling in the darkness like smoke.

Red eyes glowed from within the shifting void, watching him intently. The darkness around the figure seemed alive, constantly twisting and writhing as though it were struggling to maintain its form. Vines jutted from the figure's back, curling upward until they resembled grotesque antlers, casting ominous shadows over the table.

Suddenly, the trees themselves stirred to life, their branches stretching out like long, spindly arms.

With impossible grace, they placed plates in front of each guest, including Will.

The dishes were piled high with strange, grotesque offerings. Food that seemed both sumptuous and sickening, glistening in the dim, unnatural light.

Organs were piled high on each plate along with cuts of flesh. Blood well over the sides of the fine China, spilling into the white linen of the table. The smell wafting through the dreamscape with a nauseating, metallic tang.

The skeletons, without warning, turned toward the figure and began to clap. Slow, deliberate applause that echoed unnaturally through the trees.

The antler figure bowed deeply in response, its crimson eyes never leaving Will as the skeletal guests kept applauding.

The figure extended a hand, its fingers elongated and skeletal, and gestured toward the plates.

The gesture was both an invitation and a command. Will felt a pang of fear and resignation as the figure's gaze bore into him, the weight of expectation hanging heavy in the air.

Their cutlery remained on the table as they used their hands. Eating like swine, shoving as much as they could into their mouths as Will and the figure watched.

Each piece of meat eaten began to restore flesh to the skeletons, winding around their bones as shapes began to form and fill out their suits till they were human once more.

Smiling faces turning toward Will again as applause erupted.

The human guests watched as the figure at the end of the table loomed larger and more menacing, and Will could only sit there, bound and vulnerable, as the dream consumed him.

The twisted forms of the Ripper's victims displayed like grotesque art at the table as Will realised who they were. The path of viscera stretched out before him, a macabre trail leading deeper into the darkness.

When he finally woke, it was with a jolt, his body drenched in sweat, his heart pounding in his chest.

The terror of the dream clung to him even more tightly.

Even awake, he couldn’t shake the feeling that it wasn’t just a nightmare. It was something more.

He felt Hannibal before he saw him, the steady presence beside him, calm and unshaken.

"Will," Hannibal's voice broke through the haze, firm but gentle, pulling Will back to the present. A warm hand settled on his shoulder, grounding him in the safety of their shared space.

Hannibal had woken easily, attuned to every shift in Will’s breathing, his tension.

Will turned slightly, still catching his breath, his eyes wide and distant. Almost afraid to look out to see the all to familiar faces of the Chesapeake ripper’s victims.

"You were dreaming again," Hannibal said softly, his dark eyes studying Will with quiet intensity. His hand moved to Will’s back, rubbing small, deliberate circles. "What did you see?"

Will hesitated, his throat dry as he tried to form words.

The images of the skeltal bodies, and the dark shadow standing at the head of the table all flooded back in vivid detail.

He swallowed hard, glancing at Hannibal, who watched him with that patient, unwavering gaze, waiting for his response.

“I saw…” Will’s voice was hoarse, barely above a whisper. “Bodies. No, not bodies… pieces. Organs, viscera, skeletons eating to become whole again. It was… I don’t know what it means.”

Hannibal’s gaze sharpened, though he remained quiet, his hand never stopping its soothing motion. Will felt the weight of Hannibal’s attention, the way he was always so fascinated by the workings of Will’s mind, even when it teetered on the edge of something darker.

He didn’t understand why he kept seeing that shadowy figure in his dreams, or why the skeletons now haunted his mind.

But it didn’t matter.

Not now.

He let himself sink into the warmth of Hannibal’s touch, the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath him as Will lay down, resting his head there. The rhythmic thrum of Hannibal’s heartbeat filled his ears, a tether to the present, something solid to hold onto in the midst of the chaos swirling inside him.

In that moment, the darkness of his visions seemed far away, and all that remained was the steady beat of Hannibal’s heart.

Will's breathing slowly evened out. He closed his eyes, the nightmare still clawing at the edges of his consciousness.

“I don’t understand what it’s supposed to mean,” Will whispered, the tension in his voice betraying the vulnerability he felt. “Why would I dream of them eating to be whole again? Why do I keep seeing that figure... watching?”

Hannibal’s hand continued its calming strokes along Will’s back. He tilted his head slightly, the faintest hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, though Will couldn't see it. “Dreams are rarely so literal, Will. They can be our mind’s attempt to process what we cannot consciously grasp.”

Will’s eyes fluttered open, focusing on nothing in particular as he tried to push through the haze of confusion. “The skeletons… the organs… it’s like they’re rebuilding something. It felt purposeful. And the figure with the antlers… it was commanding them.”

Hannibal's hand paused briefly, just for a moment, before resuming its rhythm. His voice, when he spoke, was low and thoughtful. “Perhaps, in your subconscious, you are piecing together something you have yet to fully comprehend. You’ve been studying the Ripper case, examining the pieces, viscera, blood, organs. Perhaps the figure represents the force behind it, a creator, pulling it all together.”

Will tensed at that. “The Ripper...”

Hannibal’s gaze was unreadable, but his voice remained soothing. “The Ripper is an artist in his own right. His work is a composition of flesh and bone, carefully curated and displayed. You are drawn to it, perhaps more than you are willing to admit.”

Will didn’t know how to respond to that. The truth Hannibal spoke gnawed at him, the idea that he found a morbid fascination in the Ripper’s work making his stomach churn.

But there was no denying the connection he felt to it, no denying the way it lingered in his mind, even in his sleep.

He closed his eyes again, letting out a shuddering breath. “I don’t want to be like him.”

Hannibal’s hand stilled once more, his other hand moving to rest against the back of Will’s head, cradling him gently. “You are nothing like him, Will. You are capable of seeing the beauty in his work, but that does not mean you are destined to follow his path.”

Will’s heart ached at those words, the conflict within him boiling beneath the surface. He didn’t know what to make of the dream, the Ripper.

But for now, with Hannibal's arms around him and the nightmares at bay, he allowed himself to rest.

Even if just for a moment.

"Rest now," Hannibal murmured, his thumb brushing over Will's cheek. "You are safe here. You are with me."

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Chapter 11

Will stepped through the front door, the faint click of the latch echoing through the quiet house.

Zoe greeted him enthusiastically, tails wagging, but this time there was an addition. A new, scruffy mutt trotting along behind Will, cautiously sniffing the air of its new home.

Will had found the dog earlier that day, abandoned and shivering near the station, and despite everything, he couldn't leave it behind.

Hannibal, seated in his usual chair near the fire, was flipping through a medical journal when he heard the familiar sound of nails against the hardwood floor.

He glanced up, his brow arching slightly as he took in the sight of Will, cradling the new arrival with an ease that almost made Hannibal envious.

"Another one?" Hannibal asked, his tone warm and not the least bit surprised.

Will hesitated for a moment, unsure if Hannibal would be bothered by the sudden addition. He shrugged, offering a small smile. "Found him near the station. Couldn't just leave him."

The dog, still unsure of its new surroundings, trotted further into the room, sniffing cautiously at Hannibal's legs. Hannibal observed with a calm detachment, not moving from his seat, but there was no tension, no hint of displeasure. He watched as the dog sniffed his shoes, then slowly turned its attention back to Will, seeking reassurance.

Hannibal set the journal aside, his attention now fully on the dog. "He seems to have already decided where he belongs."

Will smiled, kneeling to pat the dog, rubbing behind its ears as the animal relaxed slightly. “He’ll fit in,” Will said, looking up at Hannibal. “It won’t be any trouble.”

“I never doubted that,” Hannibal replied smoothly, his eyes following the dog as it padded over to join Zoe in a corner of the room. “You have a remarkable way of finding strays, Will.”

There was a slight teasing edge to Hannibal’s words, but no malice. If anything, there was admiration in his gaze as he looked at Will.

Will stood, his shoulders loosening, the quiet understanding between them settling once again. The house felt at peace, like the new addition had simply slipped into place without disturbing the balance. “I think it’s more a case of they find me.”

Hannibal, with a faint smile, gestured toward the kitchen. “Shall I prepare something for dinner while you make sure our newest guest is comfortable?”

Will nodded, casting one more glance at the dogs before following Hannibal. He knew, in this small moment of silent acceptance, that Hannibal’s presence, like the house itself was adaptable, capable of expanding to hold whatever Will brought home.

Even a scruffy dog from the river.

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The date seemed to mock Will. It was hard to believe a year had passed since he met Hannibal and left the boatyards of Louisiana behind.

So much had changed.

Tailored suits had replaced the worn clothes he used to wear. He had his own car and a home, not just a home, but a house being transformed by Hannibal into something lavish, as if it belonged in a design magazine. Where he once had to scrounge for meals, he now had a kitchen overflowing with gourmet ingredients.

He had money now. His own account that accumulated interest as his money simply sat there, because Hannibal provided everything. Will wanted for nothing.

Best of all, he had a family too. Jack and Zoe, his strays, were proof of that.

Hannibal never openly doted on them, but Will saw the signs, the baskets neatly placed in the hallway, the water and food bowls in the foyer. Hannibal had been firm about forbidding them in the kitchen, yet Zoe had learned to sit just at the edge, quickly teaching Jack to do the same.

They knew, as Will did, that Hannibal would eventually give in, slipping them pieces of meat from whatever dish he was preparing.

Will would smile whenever he saw it. The way Hannibal spoiled them in small, secret ways, indulgences Will pretended not to notice. Zoe and Jack would look to Will with their puppy eyes, hoping to coax more, but Will knew he spoiled them in other ways. They mostly stayed outside when no one was home, but if Will came back late, Hannibal would have already let them in and fed them. Will never had to ask. Hannibal just understood, caring for them as attentively as he did for Will.

It was strange, surreal even, to think about the life he now led.

Did he ever imagine he'd end up here?

No.

Will had always pictured himself stuck on the Mississippi, fixing boat motors with grease-stained hands while his father smoked beside him.

Some days, he missed his dad.

But not today.

Will sat in his dimly lit office, surrounded by stacks of case files, crime scene photos, and hastily scrawled notes. His bloodshot eyes scanned the details over and over, but nothing clicked. The clarity he usually relied on was absent. He felt blind, lost in a maze of disjointed pieces that refused to fit together.

The images haunted him, the faces of the victims, the grotesque displays. They played in his mind like a film stuck on repeat, yet no pattern emerged, no signature that set this killer apart. Flipping through the photos again, his fingers trembled with frustration. Each scene was brutal, meticulously crafted, and yet, the Ripper remained a ghost.

Time ticked away, each second adding to the growing weight on his chest. He rubbed his temples, willing some kind of breakthrough, but his mind felt fogged, as if the answer was just out of reach. “What am I missing?” he muttered, scanning his notes again.

There were no breaks, no new leads. The Ripper was always one step ahead, leaving nothing but carnage in his wake.

And Will.

He was drowning in it.

His empathy, the thing that made him such a skilled profiler for the Baltimore police, now felt more like a curse. The more he tried to step into the ripper’s mind, the more he felt himself slipping, drawn to the violence, the dark artistry of it. It unsettled him how easily he

could immerse himself in that world, how at ease he felt within it. Like the Ripper welcomed him, holding him close as he showed him his art.

Frustration boiled over.

With a snarl, Will shoved the files off his desk, papers scattering across the floor. He stood abruptly, pacing the small room as if movement might shake something loose in his mind. But still, no revelations came, no sudden insights.

His fingers drifted to his collar, brushing over the leather and the scar beneath, Hannibal's mating mark. The touch grounded him, the lingering heat a reminder of their bond.

Part of him just wanted to go home, to sink into the quiet comfort of Hannibal's arms. But another part urged him to find a gift, something for their anniversary.

Was Hannibal the type to celebrate the day they first met or the day they officially bonded? Will wasn't sure.

Either way, he needed to make it special. If it was today or in three days time. Or maybe it would be in another week and a bit when their bond certificate was signed.

Will wasn't sure, but he wanted to be ready. To surprise Hannibal, to make it memorable for him. To give Hannibal something, even though deep down he knew Hannibal would not want for anything but for him to be close.

Will sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He had to keep going, had to keep trying to find the ripper. But right now, it felt like he was walking in circles, chasing shadows.

Then something unusual happened.

A delivery person walked into the homicide unit, holding a sleek, black gift box tied with a deep red ribbon.

Heads turned as the man walked further in, Will already felt butterflies in his chest as the man walked closer, his eyes focused on Will’s collar.

Will stared at the box, his mind already knowing who it was from before he even opened it.

Heads turned as the scent of fresh flowers filled the air. Will, who had been sitting at his desk, felt his cheeks heat up as the courier approached.

"These are for you, Mr. Graham," the man said, setting the first box down in front of Will with a smile.

“These?” Will looked at the one box, then saw another man coming through with flowers.

Another with more gift boxes elegantly decorated.

Will’s face flushed a deep shade of red as his colleagues began to notice the growing stack of gifts. He could feel eyes on him as he quietly murmured his thanks, pulling the first box closer as if it would somehow shrink the attention he was receiving.

"Another one?" Dave grinned as the last box was placed on Will’s desk, leaning back in his chair with an amused glint in his eyes. "Looks like someone’s trying to spoil you rotten."

Will tried to focus on untying the ribbon, avoiding eye contact. The box was filled with exquisite items: a silk tie, a leather-bound notebook, and a handwritten note from Hannibal in his elegant script.

The flowers that sat on Will’s desk were lush and vibrant, arranged perfectly. Not simply roses but an assortment of flowers, Will could only guess at the names.

Dave let out a low whistle. "Man, Hannibal's really laying it on thick, huh? Sending you all these fancy gifts. He must be totally smitten."

Will's heart squeezed at the thought. Hannibal had always been thoughtful and generous, but this felt… overwhelming.

Lavish.

Will shifted uncomfortably in his chair, feeling the weight of the gifts and the attention from his coworkers. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate it, he did, but Hannibal had a way of turning the simplest things into grand gestures. And now, with everyone watching, it felt like a spectacle.

"Yeah," Will muttered, glancing at the flowers and the pile of gift boxes. "He's… something."

Dave chuckled. "No kidding. You better be doing something big in return if he's sending all this. What've you got planned?"

Will's mind raced as he nodded absently, trying to think of an excuse. "Uh, yeah… I was just — I'm working on it." He hadn't even thought about what to get Hannibal, let alone how to match these extravagant gifts.

Dave raised an eyebrow, clearly seeing through the lie but letting it slide. "Well, you better get on that. Looks like Hannibal's got some pretty high standards."

As soon as Dave walked away, Will let out a breath, his heart pounding. He needed to go shopping immediately, something that felt like an impossible task given how meticulous and thoughtful Hannibal always was.

Will stood up, leaving the boxes unopened, and grabbed his coat.

He needed to find something meaningful, something personal that would reflect his feelings for Hannibal, even if it couldn't quite match the grandeur of what had been delivered to him.

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Will found himself at a loss, wandering through upscale boutiques and specialty stores. The general demeanour was to ignore him while he walked around the store, the police uniform that Will were seemed to make people think he was poor. Will knew that when he met their eyes, noses turning up or a general look of dismissal upon their faces.

Not that they would help, they'd likely try and sell him the most expensive item they could if they knew. First anniversary present for an alpha, it would not match what Will wanted, it would just be easy money to them.

Truly, Will was overwhelmed by the options and unsure of what would truly be worthy of Hannibal.

Nothing seemed right, no gift could match the elegance and thoughtfulness of the man who had transformed his life so completely.

After several frustrating stores that produced nothing, Will felt like he was running out of options till he bumped into Eleanor Komeda. She was known for her impeccable taste, and if anyone could help him, it was her.

"Eleanor," Will began awkwardly, then giving a tight smile.

"Will," she greeted him warmly, her sharp eyes taking in his frazzled state. "Out shopping?"

He sighed, feeling a sense of relief at her appearance. "Trying to. But I'm not having much luck."

She raised an eyebrow. “For Hannibal, I presume?”

Will nodded. “I have no idea what to get him. Everything seems so… ordinary.”

A knowing smile curved Eleanor’s lips. “Hannibal is anything but ordinary. But that doesn’t mean the gift needs to be extravagant. It needs to be thoughtful, something that reflects your understanding of him.”

Will ran a hand through his hair, feeling more lost than ever. “That’s the problem. I don’t know what that would be.”

Eleanor’s eyes softened as she stepped closer, her voice dropping to a more intimate tone. “Don’t worry, I think I can help. Follow me.”

Without hesitation, Will followed her, a sense of hope returning. Eleanor Komeda might just be the key to finding a gift worthy of the man he loved.

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Their first stop was a watch boutique.

Will had no idea what he was truly looking at as his eyes scanned the watches on display.

The sleek, polished cases, the intricate designs. Each one seemed more luxurious than the last. He couldn’t see the price tags, but he didn’t need to.

The way they were presented, the heavy weight of exclusivity in the air, told him everything he needed to know.

He’d heard of Rolex before, of Patek Philippe, of Zenith. Names that sounded distant and unattainable in his old life, back when even the thought of owning a high-end watch felt absurd. But now, here he was, searching for something worthy of Hannibal’s refined taste, standing in a boutique where each piece was a small masterpiece in its own right.

Will glanced over at Eleanor, who had an easy, practiced smile on her face as she inspected the watches. She pointed out subtle details, the craftsmanship, the history behind certain designs, but Will’s mind was spinning.

“It has to be more than a timepiece,” Eleanor mused, pausing over a collection of exquisite watches.

Eleanor’s smile widened as she placed a hand on Will’s shoulder, her voice light but knowing. “Whatever you pick, I know Hannibal will love it.”

Will paused in front of one particular watch, its intricate dials and skeleton design catching his attention. The exposed mechanics appealed to him immediately, the way it allowed a view inside, an openness that seemed so fitting for Hannibal's appreciation of craftsmanship and detail. To see past the face and view the inner workings.

“Grieb & Benzinger Blue Sensation,” the salesman spoke with practiced detachment, his gaze flicking over Will in appraisal. “However, I believe it may be out of your price range, sir. I have a collection of more… modest options—”

Eleanor didn’t miss a beat. “This is Will,” she interrupted, her tone carrying a subtle weight. “Hannibal Lecter’s mate,”. There was no need for further explanation.

The salesman froze, a brief flicker of realization crossing his face before he quickly recovered. “My apologies, sir,” he said, now more than eager to accommodate as he retrieved the watch with reverent care.

Will bit the inside of his cheek, suppressing the discomfort that bubbled up from the exchange.

Eleanor seemed unfazed, her smile growing as Will turned his focus back to the watch. It was beautiful, intricate, everything Hannibal would appreciate. “I think he would like it,” Will murmured, but there was still uncertainty in his voice. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he was out of his depth.

Eleanor’s soft laugh startled him. “Oh darling, have you not figured it out yet?”

Will blinked, confused. “Figured what out?”

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. “It’s not the gift itself that matters to Hannibal. It’s that *you* chose it. He’s already enchanted by you.”

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Next, they ventured to a high-end wine shop. "A bottle of rare vintage wine is always a thoughtful choice," Eleanor said, guiding Will to a small section tucked away from the main floor. They selected a rare Bordeaux, aged for decades in oak barrels from a little-known vineyard. The vintage was as rare as it was refined, a perfect match for Hannibal’s sophisticated palate.

At a rare bookstore, Eleanor’s eyes lit up as they perused the shelves. Will knew Hannibal would appreciate something historical and meaningful, so they picked out a surgical text, an antique book filled with meticulous illustrations and writings about early groundbreaking surgical methods. Its weathered leather cover and intricate detailing made it a piece of medical history Hannibal would treasure.

Finally, Eleanor led Will to a bespoke tailor shop. After browsing through swatches of fabric, they found the perfect seven-fold necktie, made from the finest silk. Its intricate folds and impeccable craftsmanship gave it an understated elegance, designed for someone who valued subtle luxury.

With the gifts in hand, Will felt a sense of accomplishment, knowing that each item reflected both Hannibal’s refined taste and the depth of their relationship. Eleanor smiled warmly, pleased with their selections.

“Hannibal will adore these,” she said confidently, and Will couldn’t help but feel a wave of relief at having found gifts that would live up to the man he loved.

Will nodded, feeling a rush of relief that it was finally over. The tension he'd carried all day started to ease as he packed the gifts into the Continental, sitting them on the passenger seat like the treasured items they were.

He hadn't dared glance at the receipts, slipping them discreetly into each gift bag in case Hannibal wanted to exchange anything later. It was a small, unspoken concession, an acknowledgment of the lingering uncertainty that gnawed at him despite Eleanor's reassurances.

As he slid his wallet back into his jacket, the sleek platinum card Hannibal had given him months ago felt heavier than usual. It had always been there, a silent symbol of the life Hannibal had introduced him to, but today it weighed on him in a way that gnawed at his conscience. The guilt simmered quietly beneath the surface as he sat behind the wheel.

It wasn't about the money, Hannibal had always been generous, never sparing expense when it came to Will's comfort, but something deeper.

Will still wasn't used to this life, to the idea of accepting so much without giving in return.

However, it wasn't his money that he'd used. It was Hannibal's. Part of him feared he'd overspent.

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Will tiptoed through the front door, the gifts rustling softly in his arms.

He hoped to slip in unnoticed, to do something with the gifts, maybe place them in the living room. Wanting to surprise Hannibal, in a less spectacular manner that he had surprised him. He thought he'd have a few more minutes of peace before Hannibal's knowing eyes would catch him.

But Hannibal was always one step ahead.

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Just as Will rounded the foyer, he felt warm hands suddenly cover his eyes, and a rich, familiar voice whispered in his ear.

“Caught you,” Hannibal said, his breath ghosting over Will’s neck.

Will’s heart jumped, not from fear but from the electric thrill Hannibal’s presence always sparked in him. Before he could react, Hannibal gently spun him around, the gifts momentarily forgotten as Will found himself face-to-face with his alpha.

Hannibal’s eyes gleamed with amusement, a predatory smile tugging at his lips. Without a word, he leaned in and captured Will’s mouth in a kiss, slow and deliberate, claiming.

Will melted into it, surrendering to the moment, to the feel of Hannibal’s hands on him and the taste of the kiss that left him breathless. Wine and sandalwood flooded Will’s senses, he opened, welcoming Hannibal further.

When Hannibal pulled back, he tilted his head slightly, eyes filled with affection and playfulness. "Did you really think you could sneak past me, Will?" he murmured, fingers still lightly gripping Will's waist.

Will laughed softly, shaking his head. "I should’ve known better."

Hannibal smirked, his thumb brushing lightly against Will's jawline. “You should have,” he murmured. “I always know where you are.”

Will rolled his eyes playfully but couldn't suppress the warmth that spread through him. "You're insufferable."

“Perhaps,” Hannibal replied, his voice smooth as ever. “But I’m yours, insufferable or not.”

Will smiled a little wider, leaning into Hannibal’s touch when he felt him gently take the gifts from his arms.

"You didn’t have to," Hannibal said softly, though there was a flicker of curiosity in his eyes as he glanced down at the neatly wrapped packages.

"I wanted to," Will replied, his voice quiet but firm. "And... I can transfer the money to cover it."

Hannibal's brow arched, amusement tugging at the corner of his mouth. "The thought of you trying to repay me is more of a gift than the items themselves."

Will flushed, ducking his head. "I’m serious."

"And I am amused," Hannibal countered, his tone warm as he pulled Will closer with one hand while still holding the gifts in the other. "Your gesture is more than enough. But I’m eager to see what you've chosen for me."

Will’s heart fluttered, watching as Hannibal carefully took the gifts, placing them on the dinning room table, clearly touched by the effort.

"It wasn't me who chose the gifts," Will admitted, feeling his cheeks burn. "I had some help from—"

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to spoil the surprise," Hannibal interrupted smoothly, a flirtatious smile playing at his lips as he tilted Will's chin up to meet his gaze. "I enjoy a bit of mystery."

Will's blush deepened, but he couldn’t help but smile back. Hannibal always had a way of making him feel as if everything he did, no matter how small, was appreciated, treasured, even.

Will couldn’t help but feel Elanor Komeda was right about what she said. There was a glint in Hannibal's eyes, that quiet intensity that always seemed to unnerve Will and comfort him all at once. The way it made his heart beat a little faster and made him feel warmer.

Hannibal carefully unwrapped the first gift, eyes flickering up to Will between each motion, savoring the moment. Will stood there, almost holding his breath, waiting for Hannibal’s reaction, for approval.

Hannibal's fingers were methodical as he unwrapped the first gift, the paper falling away to reveal the sleek box. His eyes sparkled when he saw the name on it, Grieb & Benzinger.

He hummed softly, a pleased sound that sent a wave of relief through Will.

"Ah, exquisite," Hannibal murmured, lifting the watch from its case and admiring the intricate mechanics within, the skeleton design displaying the inner workings of the watch in perfect harmony. "Blue Sensation. I do appreciate the artistry of it... the way the gears turn, each piece working together to create something so precise. To see the heart of the watch working to give the precise time."

Will couldn’t help but smile. "I thought you'd like it."

Hannibal turned his gaze to Will, eyes alight with a rare warmth. "You thought correctly, my love." He extended his wrist toward Will, holding the watch out.

"Indulge me.” Hannibal turned, placing the watch into Will’s hands. “I insist you place it on me."

Will hesitated for a moment, holding the watch carefully in his hands, his fingers brushing over Hannibal's skin as he clasped it around his wrist. Hannibal watched him the entire time, that same intense, unwavering focus making Will’s skin flush.

"Perfect," Hannibal said, admiring the watch now resting on his wrist. His hand moved to Will’s, drawing him closer. "Just like you."

Will cleared his throat, trying to regain his composure. "There are... other gifts," he started, his voice soft and a little hesitant. "But—"

Hannibal didn’t give him the chance to finish. Before Will could get another word out, Hannibal's lips were on his, firm and insistent, cutting off any protest.

The kiss was deliberate, a clear distraction, and Will could feel himself melting into it despite his intentions of trying to shower gifts on Hannibal. Then, what could he truly buy the alpha that had everything he wanted.

When Hannibal finally pulled away, Will’s breath was ragged, and his thoughts momentarily scattered.

“I’ll get to them in time,” Hannibal whispered against his lips, his hands already deftly drawing intricate patterns on Will’s clothes, wiith smooth movements, his attention never leaving Will.

Will tried to focus, but Hannibal’s presence, the lingering taste of the kiss, made it hard to think clearly. Hannibal stepped back, his eyes glinting with amusement as if he knew exactly what he was doing.

“We can get to the rest later,” Hannibal said, his voice rich with affection. “But right now, I want to focus on you.”

“Even though it’s our day,” Will licked his lips. “I promise I’ll repay you for the gifts.”

“The only payment I desire from you,” Hannibal murmured, his voice warm and intimate, “is your happiness.”

Will felt the weight lift, if only a little, under the reassurance of Hannibal’s words.

“There is one more gift.” Will blushed a little looking down.

Hannibal's gaze sharpened, a slow smile curling at the corner of his lips as he stepped closer to Will. His voice was low, filled with promise. “And where, may I ask, is this gift waiting for me?”

Will shifted under the weight of Hannibal’s intense stare, his cheeks flushing as he looked down. His voice was barely above a whisper when he answered, “You have to unwrap it first.”

Hannibal’s eyes darkened with unmistakable intent as he reached out, his fingers brushing lightly against Will's jaw before tilting his chin up to meet his gaze. “Then I suppose I shouldn’t keep it waiting.”

Will's breath hitched, anticipation thick in the air as Hannibal leaned in, a teasing smile playing on his lips, ready to savor every moment of this new unveiling.

Hannibal's fingers worked with meticulous precision, undoing the buttons of Will's shirt one by one. The fabric fell away easily, revealing the pale skin beneath.

Hannibal's lips soon followed, brushing softly against the exposed collarbones as he pressed a lingering kiss there.

Will shivered at the sensation, feeling the warmth of Hannibal's breath against his skin, each touch deliberate and slow. His hands instinctively reached out to grasp Hannibal's shoulders, steadying himself as the intensity of the moment grew, the room heavy with the shared desire.

Hannibal's mouth continued its path, trailing soft kisses down the length of Will's neck as he whispered, "A gift worth savoring."

Will laughed, breath hitching when Hannibal sucked on his nipple, feeling his knees go weak before Hannibal removed his pants.

“Magnificent,” Hannibal whispered in Will’s ear, hands moving down to cup Will, even move pleased to find the lingerie crotchless.

As Hannibal's kisses deepened, his hands moved lower, tracing the contours of Will's body. His fingers brushed against the intricate straps of the lingerie Will wore, a one-piece set that hugged his form with delicate precision.

The straps crisscrossed over his chest and torso, laced around him like a second skin, with teasing open holes that revealed glimpses of his skin beneath.

Hannibal paused, his breath catching as he took in the sight, his eyes darkening with appreciation. "You truly are a masterpiece," he whispered, his voice a low, rumbling growl as he allowed his hands to explore the delicate material, fingers tracing the edges of each strap.

Will's heart pounded in his chest, the tension between them thick in the air, his body responding to every touch, every deliberate brush of Hannibal's fingers. The scent of slick hung in the air.

Hannibal’s hands slid beneath Will, lifting him effortlessly, his strength controlled and deliberate. Will let out a soft gasp then a hearty laugh as Hannibal carried him with ease, guiding him to the dining room.

The elegant table, usually reserved for dinner, was now repurposed for something far more intimate. Will knowing Hannibal had likely envisioned devouring him upon the polished wood many times before.

Gently, Hannibal set Will down on the smooth surface, his lips capturing Will's in a heated kiss before he could catch his breath.

The kiss was deep, passionate, as if Hannibal were savoring every second. Will's hands instinctively gripped the edge of the table, his body tingling under the intensity of Hannibal's touch. How Hannibal's lips pulled at the straps of the lingerie, Will gasping when they flicked back against his skin.

Hannibal's hands roamed Will's body, exploring every inch of skin exposed by the teasing gaps in the lingerie. His fingers curled around the straps, pulling Will closer as his mouth moved from Will's lips to his jaw, then down to his neck, placing slow, deliberate kisses along his collarbone.

"You look beautiful, darling," Hannibal murmured, his voice a low, reverent whisper that sent a shiver down Will's spine. His lips ghosted over Will's skin, just above the mating claim, before his teeth gently grazed the mark that bound them together.

Will's breath hitched, his hands sliding up Hannibal's back, clutching at his shirt as his body reacted to the familiar and intoxicating sensation. Hannibal's teeth nipped at the scar, a possessive touch that sent warmth coursing through Will, grounding him in the moment.

Hannibal pulled back slightly, his dark eyes gleaming with affection and desire as he studied Will. "Absolutely perfect," he whispered before capturing Will's lips once more in a fervent kiss.

All Will could do was wrap his legs around Hannibal, pulling him in closer. He could feel the bulge of his cock through his trousers, a slow thrust from Hannibal had Will biting his lip, salivating at what was to come.

Will's breath hitched slightly, his heart pounding as he met Hannibal's gaze. A small, nervous laugh escaped him before he whispered, "You always know how to make me feel like I'm the only thing that matters."

Hannibal's eyes softened, the intensity never waning but deepened with warmth. He brushed a thumb gently over Will's flushed cheek, watching his mate with that same devotion he always had. Unwavering, consuming.

"And you are," Hannibal murmured, leaning closer until their lips were barely an inch apart. "You always will be."

The words hung in the air, heavy and full of meaning, as Hannibal pressed his lips to Will's in a kiss that was slow and deep, as though savoring every second.

Will melted into the sensation, his body relaxing under the firm yet tender touch of Hannibal's hands as moved down.

It was easy for Will to tilt his hips, letting Hannibal push a finger in, then two. Knuckle deep already as Hannibal began to stretch him open with a deliberate slowness that sent shivers down Will's spine.

Will's fingers found their way to Hannibal's shoulders, gripping tightly, feeling the steady strength beneath his touch. Hannibal smiled before he movced to kiss Will again, lips moving along Will's jaw line, then down to his neck. When he broke the kiss, his lips hovered just above Will's skin.

Then Will felt the stretch, breath hitching as Hannibal opened him wider, fingers gripping tighter onto Hannibal's shoulders as he bared his neck to his alpha.

"I need you," Will breathed, pulling Hannibal closer again with his legs. "I want you, inside me."

"How can I refuse such an invitation?" Hannibal whispered.

It didn't take long for Hannibal to undo his pants. Fabric rustling as Will watched the head of Hannibal's cock weep. The dusky red hue as hannibal slicked himself up with Will's own

arousal.

“Perfect,” Hannibal whispered against Will’s collarbone, letting his lips linger there for a moment longer before he trailed soft kisses along Will’s neck. “You’re more than perfect, Will.”

For a moment, Will groaned as Hannibal teased the head of his cock next to Will’s own, both leaking. Then Hannibal finally guided it to where Will wanted, pushing in easily, spreading Will nicely as Hannibal rocked his hips, not stopping till he was completely inside of Will.

Then Hannibal pulled back, and thrusted forward.

Will gasped, his body arching instinctively as Hannibal moved with a deliberate, controlled pace.

Every inch of contact sent waves of sensation through him, and for a moment, it felt like the air had been stolen from his lungs. He clung to Hannibal, nails digging into his shoulders as he tried to steady himself, the intensity overwhelming in the best possible way.

Hannibal’s breath was hot against his ear, soft murmurs of reassurance mixed with a quiet hum of satisfaction. “Breathe, darling,” Hannibal whispered, his voice smooth yet filled with a dark edge of pleasure. “Let yourself feel everything.”

Will's chest heaved as he struggled to pull air into his lungs, his heart hammering in time with the rhythm Hannibal set. A punishing force that had the table scrapping against the floor.

The initial sharpness began to fade, replaced by a deep, spreading warmth. He felt Hannibal fill him completely, their bodies moving in perfect sync. Hannibal’s strength and control, the way he held Will with such precision.

Will moaned, his head falling back against as Hannibal caught his neck, leaning down to let teeth sink into the bond.

They were completely lost in the sensations. The intimacy between them was more than just physical, each thrust, every touch felt like Hannibal was claiming him, not just in body but in soul.

“You’re mine, Will,” Hannibal growled, his voice laced with desire, his lips grazing Will’s neck as he moved deeper, slower, drawing out every ounce of pleasure. “Always mine.”

Will's eyes fluttered closed as he surrendered completely, letting Hannibal guide him through the storm of emotions and sensations crashing over him.

His neck was warm and wet, Hannibal’s tongue lapping at it, the metallic scent in the air that Will knew was blood when he looked at Hannibal.

Ruby red shined back at him as Will felt his own eyes sting, Hannibal’s lips were wet with his own blood, and when Hannibal leaned in closer, Will welcomed him.

Lips clashed, breath stolen as Will kissed Hannibal, mouth opening as he felt him steal his breath.

“Knot me,” Will breathed, breaking the kiss as he pulled Hannibal as close as he could. He could already feel Hannibal waiting, part of him waiting for Will to ask, he knew. God did he want it, to be stretched impossibly full by Hannibal’s knot, belly swollen with seed.

“My omega.” Hannibal spoke, lifting one of Will’s legs.

“Alpha,”

Will screamed as Hannibal thrust forward, searing pain before pleasure began to hit him.

“Come for me,” Hannibal murmured.

And Will did.

Ecstasy spilt over in waves as Hannibal came, Will could feel the warmth pooling inside of him. Hannibal’s arms around him, supporting him, every sense, every part of him surrounded by his alpha as Will came down from the orgasmic bliss.

Will’s breath was shaky, his body limp as Hannibal kissed his lips softly, arms underneath him, supporting his weight and making him comfortable. Slowly, Will lreached up, hand resting on Hannibal’s cheek before Hannibal turned to kiss it. Will could feel his pulse, the steady thrum, bounding under his fingers in time with his own.

“You… you make me feel loved,” Will admitted, his voice barely audible, his body reacting to every movement of Hannibal’s hands.

He’d never fully seen himself the way Hannibal did, but in moments like this, when every look, every touch was infused with love, Will almost believed it.

Hannibal pulled back just slightly, his gaze locking with Will’s again, intense but gentle, as though he was looking at something rare and precious. “I make you feel what is already true.”

“You deserve to be cherished.” Hannibal whispered between kisses, his voice low and promising.

Will’s heart swelled. “I love you,”.

Hannibal smiled a little wider, his gaze softening as he looked down at Will, their bodies still intertwined. "And I, you," he whispered, his voice rich with affection. He leaned in, brushing his lips tenderly against Will’s forehead, lingering in the moment. "More than you could ever know."

His hands trailed gently over Will's skin, his touch reverent as though he was holding something precious. "You are everything to me, Will," Hannibal continued, his voice steady, sincere. "My equal, my desire, my life. My omega."

Will's heart raced at Hannibal's words, feeling the weight of them settle deep inside. He reached up, cupping Hannibal's face, pulling him down for a kiss that was slow and deliberate, full of the love and trust they had built together. "My alpha."

"I'll give you everything you need, anything you want, anything you desire," Hannibal promised softly. "Everything. All I want is you by my side."

"Where else would I go?" Will smiled back, feeling the knot deflate.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

> I just wanted to say thank you to everyone following along and leaving kudos and comments, it really does inspire me to write more with all the love I have received from this fic. I know a few people have questions about some elements esp with mpreg, but hopefully as the story continues I will shed light on it. I am the kind of person that likes to play my cards close to the chest to give readers an element of surprise, and I haven't tagged it yet because I hadn't decided if I wanted to or not. I always just try and tag the big things.

Hannibal sat at his desk, the soft glow of the office light above creating an ideal workspace. Elegant stationery lay meticulously arranged before him, and he penned the final invitations to his upcoming dinner party, having just completed his patient notes.

Will wasn't expecting him home for another two hours, leaving Hannibal ample time to collect his last ingredient, heart tartare, before heading back home.

The creak of the office door didn't disturb Hannibal; he merely breathed in the scent of Donald Sutcliffe, his jacket damp with the lingering rain.

"It seems the rain has set in for the evening," Hannibal mused without looking.

Donald made a soft sound of discontent as he hung his coat. "Indeed. I was hoping to avoid it, but it began the moment I stepped out of the car."

Hannibal's smile was imperceptible, knowing the downpour would conveniently wash away evidence later.

"Burning the candle at both ends again?" Donald inquired, eyeing the stack of invitations.

Each invitation was a masterpiece, the handwriting precise, the ink flowing effortlessly as Hannibal detailed the time and date. His dinner would be a night to remember for the fortunate few invited.

“Merely making the most of my time,” Hannibal replied, his smile perfectly controlled as he reached for an envelope.

He sealed the envelope with his custom wax seal, the deep crimson wax forming a flawless impression of his initials. Hannibal admired the understated elegance for a moment before setting the envelope aside with the others.

“The dinner party Will mentioned?” Donald chuckled. “Of course.”

“I trust you’ll find the evening intriguing,” Hannibal said smoothly, handing the sealed envelope to Donald. He watched with satisfaction as Donald’s expression shifted from curiosity to keen interest upon receiving the invitation.

Donald smiled, glancing at the envelope in his hand. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world, Hannibal. I’ll let Amanda open it later, she will be thrilled.”

Hannibal’s smile widened subtly, though his eyes remained enigmatic. "I look forward to seeing you there, Donald."

“I’ve always been curious about how you earned a scholarship into the surgical program with your drawings,” Donald remarked, pocketing the envelope.

Hannibal’s smile stayed polite, but a flicker of amusement flashed in his eyes.

"Ah, yes," Hannibal began, his voice smooth. "The art of anatomy is quite similar to the art of dissection. Both require precision." He paused thoughtfully. "My drawings illustrated an

understanding of the human form, one that intrigued my professors enough to offer me the scholarship."

Donald chuckled. "Remarkable, truly. You've always had a way of blending art with practical applications." He nodded toward the invitations.

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, his expression unreadable. "Indeed. The human body, when deeply understood, can be appreciated on many levels." His gaze locked with Donald's, his voice lowering just enough to add weight to his words. "But true mastery comes when one can seamlessly blend those levels."

Donald nodded, a touch of admiration for Hannibal's skill. "Well, I'm certainly looking forward to whatever culinary masterpiece you've prepared for the party. Your reputation for merging art with practicality is well established there too."

Hannibal's gracious smile remained fixed. "I assure you, Donald, it will be an unforgettable evening."

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The evening air outside Hannibal's home carried the crispness of early autumn, but inside, the warmth of a grand celebration enveloped the room.

Hannibal had meticulously planned the dinner party, no detail was left to chance. The table was an exquisite display of elegant floral arrangements with a stark reminder on humanity of animal bones and skulls.

A representation of light and dark, highlighted by the soft glow from chandeliers and polished silverware. The lights cast a golden hue over the guests who mingled with glasses of wine in hand.

Will felt his jaw tense as he watched Donald and Amanda take their seats, waiters moving around topping up glasses of wine as they served guests.

“You look ravishing,” Hannibal murmured, his voice a velvet whisper as he leaned in, pressing a deliberate kiss to the nape of Will’s neck. His breath was warm against Will’s skin, sending a shiver down his spine. “As always.”

Will smirked faintly, feeling Hannibal’s hands smoothing the fabric of his jacket, a perfectly tailored suit that fit him like a second skin. “You get off on dressing me,” Will mumbled, half teasing, though there was a knowing edge in his tone.

Hannibal’s smile widened slightly, his fingers lingering on Will’s collar. “Perhaps,” he purred, his voice low and intimate, “but only because you wear my choices so well.”

Will turned his head slightly, meeting Hannibal’s gaze, a mixture of amusement and something deeper in his eyes. “I’m beginning to think you like playing dress-up with me as much as cooking.”

Hannibal’s expression remained unreadable, but his touch was as calculated as ever, adjusting the smallest detail of Will’s attire with an almost obsessive precision. “Dressing you is simply another form of art, Will. And you, like my finest creations, deserve only the best.”

Will rolled his eyes, though there was no real irritation behind it. “Just as long as I’m not the main course tonight,” he muttered under his breath.

Hannibal’s chuckle was soft, rich with dark amusement. “Not tonight, my dear.” His lips brushed against Will’s ear in a gesture that was both possessive and reassuring. “Tonight, you are my dessert.”

Will shifted slightly feeling his cheeks flush, adjusting the cuffs of his shirt as he glanced toward the dining room, where the soft murmur of conversation and clinking glasses drifted in from their guests.

“You should tend to them,” Will said quietly, the edge of a smirk tugging at his lips. “They’ll start to wonder where you are, and I’d hate for them to think the host was neglecting them.”

Hannibal’s eyes gleamed with amusement, lingering on Will, but he didn’t move immediately. “I find it difficult to leave when you look so… captivating,” he murmured, the compliment laced with unmistakable intent. His fingers lightly brushed Will’s wrist, a subtle touch that carried more weight than it seemed.

Will chuckled softly, shaking his head. “I’ll be there soon,” he reassured, his voice low. “But you go first, make your grand entrance. It’ll give me a chance to slip in unnoticed.”

“Unnoticed?” Hannibal’s tone lightly teasing. “I find that hard to believe, Will.”

“I don’t need all eyes on me,” Will replied with a slight shrug, but his gaze held Hannibal’s with a steady intensity. “Besides, you know how I like to observe first. I can’t do that if everyone’s watching.”

Hannibal turned slightly to Will, the barest trace of a smile touching his lips. “Then allow me to seat you first, before I make the toast,” Hannibal said, his tone smooth and warm, yet laced with an undertone of expectation.

The long, elegant dining table glistened with crystal glassware and fine china, a testament to Hannibal’s impeccable sense of occasion. Will stood quietly beside him, still adjusting to the attention he drew.

With a gracious gesture, Hannibal placed his hand lightly on Will's back, guiding him toward his seat at the head of the table, directly to Hannibal’s right. The subtle contact wasn’t lost on Will; it was steadying, almost reassuring, a silent reminder of the bond they shared.

“The seat of honor,” Hannibal remarked softly, his voice like silk, audible only to Will. “Where you belong.”

Will took his seat, feeling the weight of Hannibal's quiet authority beside him, and perhaps, the comfort that came with it.

Hannibal settled standing behind his own chair with an air of quiet command, his gaze sweeping over the assembled guests, ensuring that every detail was in place, every guest attended to.

He turned to Will, offering a small but genuine smile, a reflection of pride, satisfaction, and something deeper. Will glanced at him briefly, the unspoken significance of sitting at Hannibal's right not lost on him.

There was no mistaking the message: this wasn't just a professional accolade being celebrated tonight; it was a declaration of their connection, of Will's importance in Hannibal's world.

The soft glow of light illuminated Hannibal's composed features, the smile that bore no teeth and didn't make his eyes crinkle. The smile Will knew too well that was genuine, the one Hannibal's flashed when their eyes met. Hannibal raised his glass, and the subtle clink of crystal rippled through the room as the guests followed suit.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Hannibal began, his voice smooth, each word carefully chosen, "Tonight, we gather not just for a meal, but for an experience. A symphony of flavors, crafted to evoke emotion and memory, to celebrate art in its purest form."

He paused for a moment, letting the weight of his words settle over the room, eyes lingering on each guest before returning to Will, seated at his right. Like the hand of God.

Hannibal's glass hovered just above the table as he turned to his guests, his voice taking on a deeper, more contemplative tone. "Without death, there can be no present."

"We live our lives with the knowledge that our time is finite, that the end is inevitable. And it is this very knowledge, this ever-present awareness of death that sharpens our appreciation of life. It heightens every moment, every sensation."

Hannibal paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle. “The ephemeral nature of existence is what gives each experience its significance. Without the finality of death, the present would lose its urgency, its beauty. It is this balance of life and death, creation and destruction, that I seek to honor tonight.”

The guests sat enraptured, their wine glasses momentarily forgotten, as Hannibal’s voice wove a spell of philosophy and intrigue around the table.

“As we indulge in the delicacies before us, let us remember that each flavor, each texture, is fleeting—just as our lives are. The richness of this meal, like the richness of life itself, is made more poignant by its transience.”

He glanced at Will, who sat silently at his right, their eyes meeting in a quiet moment of understanding.

“So, let us not merely celebrate life,” Hannibal continued, his voice now a subtle undercurrent to the room’s breathless anticipation, “but the inevitability of its end. For in that recognition, we find the true meaning of the present. Without death, there is no urgency, no passion, no reason to savor what we have.”

He raised his glass higher, a gleam in his eye as the guests followed his lead. “To life,” he said, his lips curving into a faint smile, “and to death, its ever-present companion.”

Hannibal’s voice softened, yet his words carried a deeper gravity. “To the future that lies ahead for all of us, may we embrace it with the same passion, precision, and grace.”

A ripple of applause moved through the room, but Hannibal’s attention remained fixed on Will. His smile was subtle, but the connection between them was palpable.

Will clapped with their guests as Hannibal took his seat, their hands joining.

Elanor Komeda, seated next to Will, bowed her head graciously, her eyes gleaming with a mixture of intrigue. “Socrates couldn’t have said it better himself,” she remarked, her voice smooth, tinged with both respect and a hint of a playful challenge.

The corner of Hannibal’s mouth lifted in a subtle smile, as if pleased by her observation. “Socrates,” he mused, his voice taking on a reflective quality, “Believed that death was not to be feared, but embraced as the final truth, an end to ignorance and a doorway to wisdom.”

Hannibal turned his gaze toward Elanor, his tone as poised as ever. “Yet, even he might have found comfort in the fact that mortality enhances the beauty of the present. It is not the absence of fear but the acceptance of it that allows one to savor life fully.”

Elanor raised her glass slightly, a silent acknowledgment of his words. “Perhaps,” she replied, her eyes not leaving Hannibal’s, “it is the philosopher's task to make peace with death, while the rest of us find meaning in the fleeting pleasures of life.”

Hannibal’s smile deepened, his eyes holding hers for a moment longer than necessary, before he nodded ever so slightly. “Indeed. And tonight, we are all philosophers of a kind, seeking meaning, even if only for the span of a meal.”

Will felt Hannibal squeeze his hand, the plates placed in front of them by the wait staff as he looked down at the table.

In the light, Hannibal’s shadow stood tall, the light above creating antlers that adorned the table, each piercing into each guests plate. The clinking of silverware softly filling the room.

Will, however, remained still, his fork untouched, feeling the subtle tension in the air. He could sense Hannibal's watchful gaze, not just on the food, but on the people seated around him, each guest carefully chosen, each reaction meticulously observed.

From the corner of his eye, Will could see the calm precision with which Hannibal monitored every movement, every bite. Hannibal wasn’t simply watching his guests enjoy the meal; he was studying them, cataloging their responses to each dish.

Will waited, feeling the weight of the moment, a quiet understanding passing between him and Hannibal. In this silence, he knew that Hannibal was waiting for him, too.

Finally, Will felt the shift, a change in the air, as Hannibal's attention turned fully toward him. It was subtle but unmistakable, Hannibal's eyes resting on him with expectation, as though this moment was for them alone.

Only then did Will lift his fork, spearing a tender piece of meat. He brought it to his mouth, his senses heightening as the flavor unfolded on his tongue. Rich, savory, complex like Hannibal himself.

"This dish," Hannibal said, gesturing subtly to the course in front of them, "is meant to evoke the delicate balance between life and death. It's a reminder that even the simplest ingredients can tell a profound story."

There was something deeply intentional in the dish, a story told through the seasoning and texture, one that spoke to more than just the culinary. Will closed his eyes for a brief moment, savoring the layers of taste, letting it settle into him. The iron tang of the blood from medium rare meat, another element to heighten the meal.

When he opened his eyes again, he met Hannibal's gaze.

There was something different, something sharper, more intent. It wasn't just curiosity or admiration that gleamed in Hannibal's eyes; it was as though he was testing Will, watching carefully for a reaction, for something unspoken to reveal itself in the way he responded to the food. The moment lingered, charged and thick with meaning, one Will couldn't pin point.

"I didn't expect all this," Will murmured, glancing at the table, the guests, the finely crafted details that made the evening extraordinary.

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, a look of quiet amusement crossing his face. "You should know by now, Will, that I never do anything without purpose."

Will’s lips quirked up in response. “I’m starting to understand that.”

The guests around them continued to chat and laugh, but in Will’s mind, it was as if the room had narrowed to just the two of them.

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The silk sheets beneath Will were impossibly smooth and cool against his heated skin as he shifted languidly.

His body ached in a way that was deeply satisfying, a dull throb in his muscles that made him aware of every inch of himself. The air around him felt thick, as though it still held the lingering scent of the evening. A mix of butter, wine, and something far darker. Blood and chocolate.

Will’s breath hitched as the memory of the night replayed in his mind, vivid and sensual.

Hannibal had shared dessert with him, one unlike anything Will had ever imagined. Keeping true to his earlier promise.

The rich, velvety texture of blood-infused chocolate had been smeared across Will’s skin, a heady mix of sweetness and metallic sharpness, spread with Hannibal’s careful, deliberate touch.

And then, with the same precision Hannibal applied to his art, the chocolate had been removed, not by hand, but by his tongue.

Will’s pulse quickened at the thought.

Hannibal's mouth had explored his body slowly, savoring every inch, tasting him as though Will were another course in an extravagant, forbidden feast.

Every swipe of his tongue had sent jolts of heat through Will, the sensation both overwhelming and intimate, the boundaries between pleasure and something far more primal blurring.

The mix of blood-chocolate with sweat, Hannibal himself dancing on his tongue like another fine meal.

Now, alone in the quiet of Hannibal's bed, Will felt tanmtilized by the memory, his skin still tingling where Hannibal's tongue had traced the lines of his body.

Will groaned as he looked over at the empty side of the bed, already missing Hannibal as he had left early for work. With a sigh, he swung out of bed, forgoing a shower as he grabbed shirt and pants for the day. Swapping out his collar for the softer one lined with velvet, feeling it shift sensually against his skin as his fingers ran out the stitching of Hannibal's initials and then the bond on his neck.

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"What's that?" Dave asked, as he scented the air, turning slowly to look at Will with a curious expression. "Did you get a new aftershave?"

Will's heart skipped a beat, and a wave of heat flushed across his cheeks. His body tensed involuntarily as the memory of the night before surged back, the unmistakable scent of chocolate and blood still lingering on his skin.

He opened his mouth to respond, but the words caught in his throat, his mind racing for an excuse. The intimate moment with Hannibal seemed to hang like a veil over him, palpable in the air, and Will wasn't sure if Dave was sensing that, or something else entirely.

“Uh—no, maybe,” Will finally managed to say, forcing a casual shrug, though the flush in his cheeks betrayed him. He shifted uncomfortably, feeling as though what he had done with Hannibal was written all over him.

Dave raised an eyebrow, clearly picking up on Will’s discomfort. “Well, whatever it is, it’s... different,” he said with a smirk, but his tone was light. “Smells good, though.”

Will gave a tight-lipped smile, trying to brush it off. For a moment, Will pictured Hannibal at his side, sliding an arm around his waist in a casual but possessive gesture, pulling him just a little closer. A knowing smile would curve his lips, and in his eyes, there would be that familiar glint of amusement, like he was in on a secret only the two of them understood.

“I guess I’m just trying something new,” Will said, his tone calm, but with a subtle edge that carried a weight of its own.

The words came out smoother than he expected, carrying the ease he imagined Hannibal would have in a situation like this. Will let Hannibal’s confidence bleed into him, straightening his shoulders and looking at Dave’s right ear, just avoiding contact.

“Yeah, well,” Dave muttered, giving a small laugh. “Whatever it is, suits you.” Dave sensing something had shifted in Will’s demeanor, giving a nod of approval.

The door to the homicide office swung open with a sudden force, breaking the quiet rhythm of the room. An officer barged in without so much as a knock, his face as pale as a ghost..

“Hey, have you guys heard the news?” He blurted, his voice sharp.

Dave looked up from his paperwork, his brow furrowing at the disruption. “What news?” he asked, his tone laced with mild annoyance. Will, standing nearby, shifted slightly, his eyes narrowing in silent curiosity.

The officer took a step closer, his expression grim, almost excited, as if carrying the weight of something that couldn't wait. "Chesapeake Ripper body dump," he said, pausing for a moment to let the gravity of his words sink in. "In the city."

The air in the room seemed to shift immediately. Dave stood up straighter, his expression darkening as he processed the information. "Are you sure?" he asked, though the look on the officer's face made it clear there was no mistake.

"Positive. Just found it an hour ago," the officer replied. "Same M.O., surgical precision, organs removed. Looks like it's fresh. Downtown, near the river."

A quiet fell over the room as the words sank in, thick and oppressive. The Chesapeake Ripper had resurfaced.

Again.

Will felt a familiar unease crawl up his spine, a mixture of dread and something else, something darker, more intimate.

The Ripper was back.

His mind immediately spiraled, trying to untangle the layers of what this could mean. A new body meant a new message. But why now?

Dave cursed under his breath, standing up and reaching for his jacket. "Just when things were starting to quiet down," he muttered, shooting a glance at Will. "Looks like we're back on the Chesapeake Ripper's trail."

Will remained silent, his thoughts spinning faster than his words could form. He could already see the crime scene in his mind: the cold violence, the almost artistic arrangement of the body.

Every Ripper kill was a message, a twisted, intellectual puzzle meant for the right mind to unravel. He couldn't escape the feeling that, once again, the Ripper was speaking directly to him.

"Where exactly?" Will asked, his voice low but steady.

"Down by the river. Near the docks," the officer replied. "It's not even fully secured yet, but they called us in because of the signature."

Dave grabbed his keys, casting another look at Will, who slowly stood, his expression unreadable. "Let's move. Before the whole city's crawling over it."

As they headed for the door, Will's thoughts were locked on the Ripper. He could already sense the pull of the investigation, the deadly dance they had been part of for so long.

As they walked toward their cars, Will's heart pounded in time with the ominous thought creeping into his mind.

For reasons that both terrified and fascinated him, Will knew he would find some grim solace there.

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It was beautiful.

So breath takingly beautiful.

"Surgical incisions," Will murmured, his voice harsh in the stillness. "No doubt organs removed, taken as trophies."

The elegance and masterful strokes of the scalpel craving into flesh.

"How long has our victim been reported missing?" Will asked, though his focus never wavered from the grotesque display before him.

"Two days," Dave replied, but Will barely registered the answer. His mind was already deep in the dark labyrinth of the killer's intent.

Even the blood was patterned elegantly, trickling upward, like their victim was hung upside down.

"It was staged this way," Will said, his voice low, almost a whisper. "Eyes placed so he could see himself, even in death. And the hands..."

The wooden cross that jutted up from the ground beneath the body, crucified in a mockery of salvation. The fingers were splayed, stretched unnaturally, a symbol of the Ripper's control, his desire to manipulate not just life, but death.

"Hands staked on the crucifix," Will continued, feeling the cold, clinical precision of Hannibal's work seeping into him. "He wanted this to be seen. To be appreciated."

The elegance of it all, the meticulous care, the perverse beauty was more akin to divine intervention.

"If he was so eager for trophies, why not take the eyes?" Dave asked, his voice cutting through the heavy stillness of the crime scene. He was frowning, trying to make sense of the disturbing tableau before them.

Will's gaze remained fixed on the carefully placed eyes, reflecting the eerie, upside-down image of the victim's body. His mind, already working through the layers of symbolism and

intent, came up with an answer, one that felt as though it came from a place deeper than thought, a place of understanding.

“Some believe the eyes are the windows to the soul,” Will murmured, almost as if speaking to himself. “To take them would be to take a part of something... sacred.”

But you already had his heart, there was no soul to pry from a pig. Nothing worthy.

Dave glanced at him, confused but intrigued. Will didn’t turn to meet his gaze, his focus still on the gruesome arrangement in front of them.

The Ripper hadn’t taken the eyes because their meaning went beyond the physical. The killer had left them behind deliberately, a chilling gesture that hinted at something deeper, an understanding of life and death, of the body and the soul.

“To leave the eyes,” Will continued softly, “is to force the victim to bear witness, even in death. To stare into their own fate. The Ripper didn’t need the eyes as trophies, he left them here as part of his art.”

To see what I made you into.

Dave shifted uncomfortably beside him, the weight of Will’s words sinking in. It was as if the Ripper had not only taken the life of the victim but had also left behind a piece of the victim’s soul, trapped in the horror of its own mutilation.

"The hands staked, the body hung, the eyes watching—it’s all deliberate," Will added, his voice quieter now. "It’s about control, and about the soul. To leave the eyes behind is to leave something untouched... or perhaps to leave behind a reminder."

“Hey!” Someone shouted from across the scene, yanking Will abruptly out of his thoughts.

“Someone stop that dog!”

Will’s head snapped up, and his eyes locked onto a large stray dog barreling toward the crime scene, its eyes gleaming with mischief, or maybe just hunger.

In an instant, the dog reached the body, grabbing the carefully placed eyes in its mouth, then darting away like it had just stolen a prized toy.

Dave swore under his breath, launching into a sprint after the dog. "Dammit!" he muttered, his boots slapping against the pavement.

Another officer, caught off guard, reached for his gun and aimed it at the fleeing animal.

“No, wait!” Will shouted, his pulse spiking as he saw the barrel lift, tracking the dog.

Without thinking, he ran directly in front of the officer, throwing himself into the line of fire. The officer yelled for him to move, but Will ignored the command, his instincts driving him forward, chasing after the dog who seemed to think this was now a fun game.

In a few frantic strides, he caught up to the dog, grabbing it by the scruff of it’s neck before it could make a full escape. The collie mix squirmed in his grip, the carefully removed eyes still clutched between its teeth, half-chewed and slick with saliva.

"Easy," Will muttered, struggling to keep the dog steady. “Drop,”.

The dog dropped the eyes, and Will watched them land without a sound on the cut grass.

There was no hope in hell now of getting any prints off them, the evidence was technically destroyed. But Will didn’t feel too bad when the dog sat in front of him, now looking at the eyes as he was waiting for Will to throw them.

The officer lowered his gun, exhaling in frustration, and Dave slowed to a stop, catching his breath as he eyed the dog and what seemed to be it's mangled trophy.

"Well, there goes that piece of evidence," Dave muttered, hands on his hips as he eyed the mangled eyes at Will's feet. "You even think of picking them up and throwing them, I'll throw you with that damn mutt!"

Will couldn't help it. A laugh escaped him, unexpected and almost out of place given the grim surroundings. Dave joined him, chuckling for a few seconds before the moment faded, leaving them standing there with the absurdity of it all.

The laughter settled into the tension that hung around them like fog. As they waited for someone from the patrol car to come over with a bag to collect the ruined eyes, the weight of the crime scene started creeping back in.

But Will still hadn't let go of the dog. His hands rested gently on its thin body, feeling the fragile bones beneath the matted fur and the rough patches of skin where cuts were still healing.

The dog stopped squirming now, almost as if it sensed a kindness in him, its energy drained from the sudden chase.

"He needs a vet," Will said quietly, his fingers tracing over the ridges of old scars and fresh wounds.

Dave sighed, rubbing a hand across his forehead. "And you have a crime scene to get back to," he said, sounding half exasperated, half resigned.

Will didn't respond right away. He just kept holding the dog, feeling its ragged breath against his hand, the creature frail beneath its scrappy exterior. The dog had no part in the horrors around them, just a stray caught in the wrong place, like a shadow slipping into a nightmare.

He knew Dave was right, the crime scene was waiting. There was still a lot of work ahead, but here with the dog now wagging it's tail, Will felt at ease, more like himself than he ever knew.

"We'll get Animal Control on the way," Dave added, watching Will with a knowing look.

Will gave a stiff smile, nodding as the officer with the evidence bag finally approached to take the eyes from him. He glanced down at the dog again, its eyes meeting his.

"Yeah, I'll call them in," Will replied, gently ruffling the dog's ears. But as he released his grip on the animal, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd just taken responsibility for something more than just a stray dog.

"Let's get back to work," Dave said, already heading back toward the crime scene. Will lingered for just a second longer, then followed, leaving the dog behind, but the strange calm still clinging to him.

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Photos were pinned to the wall, forming a chaotic mosaic of the Chesapeake Ripper's handiwork.

They sat next to the board that had been up for almost a year now, a fourth victim to add.

Will had known that the Ripper had killed before, but he was truly a serial killer now with four victims. There was no denying it was methodical and calculated. But Will knew there were another two victims for them to find.

By his calculations, and his profile on the Ripper, they would already be dead. Simply awaiting for their tableau to be displayed, the last indignation for all to see. A mockery of

what they were.

Why…

The only word that came to Will's mind.

Rude.

Will stood before the display, his fingers tracing the edge of one photo as his mind pieced together the fragments, a dark and twisted puzzle taking shape.

Each photo that hung on the board truly failed to capture the brutal elegance of the Chesapeake Ripper's crimes. How his scenes were meticulously staged, victims arranged with the same care as a sculptor with white marble. Knowing the material he was working with was rare, unique, and difficult to come by. Despite his distaste for the victims.

He'd been working on the profile for hours, the room quiet except for the faint hum of the overhead lights as daylight faded. Street lamps turning on outside.

The Ripper's methods weren't simply about killing. It was about art, control, and a terrifying intimacy with death.

One by one, Will marked the common threads: surgical precision, an intimate knowledge of anatomy, psychopathic traits, narcissism... Yet with each trait he listed, it became clear that the killer didn't fit neatly into any single category.

Much like his kills, the Chesapeake Ripper defied conventional labeling. He wasn't just a surgeon or a psychopath or an artist. He was all of those things, and something more. The boundaries that typically defined killers were too narrow for someone like him. His motivations weren't rooted in impulse or disorganization, but in a calculated, almost philosophical approach to murder.

He didn't kill for need or passion and certainly not sexual pleasure. He killed with intent, turning his crimes into something transcendent, works of art that blended horror and beauty with chilling precision.

Will frowned slightly as he added more notes to the profile. This killer believed he was elevating his victims, transforming them into something greater in death than they could have ever been in life.

Still, it felt wrong, as though he wasn't capturing the true element of what the kills were about. Something was missng.

He stepped back, scanning the wall once more. The Ripper was an architect of death, constructing something beyond mere violence.

And somewhere within that philosophy, within the elegance of his brutality, lay the key to understanding him. Each body left behind wasn't just a victim, it was a message, carefully crafted and meant to be understood by only a few, maybe even only by him.

The Ripper's crimes had spanned years, they were only seeing the recent work. It was as if the killer was refining his technique, perfecting his art over time. No mistakes. Every move is deliberate.

"Anything new?" Dave's voice cut through the quiet, pulling Will out of his deep focus.

Will didn't turn around, his eyes still fixed on the wall of photos. "The Ripper had to be involved with his victims," he said, his voice steady but laced with conviction. "There's some connection we're missing."

Dave stepped closer, scanning the crime scene photos, the intricate web of details that Will had been painstakingly piecing together. "Involved how?" he asked, glancing over at Will.

Will's gaze sharpened as he stared at the images. "It's not just random. He chooses them for a reason. There's something personal, some relationship, even if it's not obvious." He tapped his finger against one of the photos. "He's meticulous, deliberate. He doesn't just kill to kill. He selects his victims, and I think they're connected to him in some way. Professionally, personally… we just haven't seen the pattern yet."

Dave furrowed his brow, leaning in to study the images more closely. "So you're saying the Ripper knows these people?"

Will nodded. "Or at least he makes it a point to get to know them. He's too careful, too invested. It's more than just murder, it's like he's… involved in their lives, in some capacity."

Dave exhaled, the weight of the idea settling in. "Which means he's hiding in plain sight."

Will nodded again, more slowly this time, his mind churning with the implications. "Exactly."

"Why become involved in their lives if he's just going to kill them?" Dave asked, his tone a mix of frustration and confusion.

Will's eyes narrowed slightly as he considered the question. He knew the Ripper wasn't like other killers. There was something different, something deeper.

"It's not about chasing them," Will replied, his voice thoughtful. "He's not a predator in the typical sense. The Ripper would never stalk his victims in a tradional sense. He doesn't need to. It's more about… Control."

Dave frowned. "So, he's what? Antisocial? Detached?"

Will shrugged. "He's selective, and that's key. He would never involve himself emotionally with his victims. He would still be in their lives, just… distanced. He doesn't form bonds, he forms opportunities. He can't connect emotionally."

The Ripper didn't crave relationships. He craved control over life and death. His interaction with his victims would have been clinical, detached, perhaps even professional. His antisocial tendencies were reflected in the way he killed, cold, methodical, with an almost surgical precision. He didn't pursue his victims with passion or rage. He observed, studied them, like a sculptor selecting the perfect piece of marble before turning it into art.

"He's not antisocial in the traditional sense," Will continued, "but he's removed. Distant. He places himself into their world, but he never allows himself to truly be a part of it. They're not people to him. They're subjects. Instruments."

Dave rubbed the back of his neck, absorbing Will's words. "So, he's in their lives, but never really... in them. He's just waiting."

Will frowned, his mind turning over the unsettling realization. "The Ripper makes sure his victims come to him."

Dave frowned back, confused. "How? How does he get them to come to him? These victims aren't random strangers, but they're not people we've seen with any obvious connection either."

"He's not hunting them down," Will murmured. "He's setting the stage, waiting for the right moment. And when it comes, they're already in his grasp."

Dave sighed, rubbing his temple. "So he doesn't have to chase them. He's already in their lives, picking the right moment... like he's curating some kind of twisted collection."

"It would explain the surgical trophies," Will said, his voice calm but carrying an unsettling clarity.

Dave raised an eyebrow. "The organs he's been taking… like they're mementos. Hence he has a collection with multiple organs, because he decided to select a different reminder from each victim?"

Will felt torn as he considered it, like it wasn't truly the whole piece of the puzzle. "Each one is carefully selected, they hold significance. The Ripper may be preserving pieces of them. Maybe it's a way for him to hold onto the mastery he feels of each victim."

Dave stood silently for a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. The weight of the Chesapeake Ripper case was heavy on his shoulders, and they seemed no closer to catching him.

"The best way to catch him," Will spoke quietly, not wanting to provide opportunity but knowing it was the only way. "Would be in the act. Send out patrols, increase the number of police on the streets and cars during the night." One thing had become clear, the Ripper wasn't going to stop. He'd continue his meticulous, calculated killings, and the only way they'd catch him would be if they were there when it happened.

Finally, Dave sighed, his decision made. "We're gonna have to flood the streets with officers," he said, his voice resolute. "If we want any chance of catching this guy, we need eyes everywhere. The Ripper is careful, but even he can't control everything. Sooner or later, he'll slip."

Will glanced at him, his face unreadable, but there was a flicker of anguish in his eyes. Part of him didn't want the Ripper to stop, he wanted to see what else he would create.

It was his job though to catch this killer.

Will swallowed. "We stake out high-risk areas, the places where he's most likely to dump his next body. It's a long shot, but if we can catch him in the act, it'll be our best chance. He won't expect us to be there. He thinks he's untouchable."

"Take him down while his hands are full, but not getting close. He hasn't used a gun, bnut he likes his scalpel." Dave spoke.

Will nodded slowly, though his mind was racing. Catching the Ripper in the act, it sounded simple, but he knew better than anyone that the Ripper was always one step ahead, always anticipating their moves. But maybe, just maybe, this time they could turn the tables.

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It was late when Will arrived at the animal control center. The fluorescent lights buzzed softly above as he made his way through the narrow, sterile halls. His mind was still tangled with thoughts of the Chesapeake Ripper, but something else had gnawed at him all evening.

The dog from the crime scene.

He found it in one of the far cages, hunched in the corner, its eyes dull, almost sulking as it gazed out forlornly. Its ribs were visible beneath its mangy fur, and Will's heart tightened. Alone, neglected, and likely abandoned. Just another casualty of a world that had forgotten it existed.

Will approached one of the attendants. "Has the owner been contacted?" he asked, his voice steady but concerned.

The man glanced up from his clipboard and shook his head. "No owner. The dog's been roaming for a while, it looks like. Came in riddled with infections. No tags, no microchip." A shrug that suggested he didn't care either.

Will's felt his chest twist. "What happens now?"

The man sighed, folding his arms. "Given its condition, it's due to be put down tomorrow morning. Too expensive to treat and no one will want to pick it up and care for it. All the shelters have knocked it back. We can't justify the cost for a stray in this kind of shape."

Will looked back at the dog, its quiet suffering evident in every labored breath. He couldn't just walk away. "I'll take him.."

The man raised an eyebrow, surprised, maybe even amused. “You sure? It’s not cheap, and... well, no offense, but you don’t look like you’re rolling in cash.”

Will met his gaze, unbothered. “Better that I try instead of just letting him be put down.”

The attendant looked at Will, eyebrows raised in surprise. "You really want to save this dog?" he asked, disbelief lacing his voice. "Most people wouldn’t bother, especially with the shape it’s in. You sure it’s worth it?"

Will’s gaze softened as he glanced back at the dog, curled up in its cage, its eyes dull and defeated. There was a quiet sadness there, a reflection of something familiar, and Will felt a deep sense of empathy. "It’s not the dog’s fault the world treated it this way," he said quietly. "It didn’t ask for this. I just want to give it a chance... make it healthy again. Maybe even see it happy."

The attendant scratched his head, still perplexed. "I don’t get it. It’s just a stray. You could pick up a healthy one somewhere, save yourself the trouble."

Will shook his head. "It’s not about convenience. It’s about doing what’s right."

The man exhaled, flipping through some papers on his clipboard. "Well, you’re a rare one, that’s for sure." He paused, then smirked slightly. "Is it true what they’re saying? That this dog... actually picked up one of the victim’s eyes like it was a ball? Sounds like something out of a horror movie."

Will gave a half-smile, the absurdity of the situation not lost on him. "Yeah, it happened. Dog didn’t know any better. It was just scavenging, doing what it had to, like any animal would. Can't really blame it for that."

The attendant chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Damn. That’s one hell of a story to tell people at parties. Just... make sure it doesn’t pick up anything else it shouldn’t." He chuckled lightly, though it trailed off as he saw the seriousness in Will’s eyes.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Finally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was late far later than he had planned to be out. The emergency vet had taken hours to treat the dog he'd impulsively rescued, and now, as the early morning crept in, Will had hoped to return unnoticed, slipping in quietly while Hannibal slept.

As Will pulled into the driveway, the soft glow of lights inside the house told him that Hannibal had stayed up, waiting.

The dog walked slowly beside Will, nervous and hesitant, its tail still and head lowered.

Will felt a pang of sympathy, knowing how much the poor animal had been through.

The vet bill had been more than he'd expected, but it was worth it to give the dog a chance. The vet had warned him that follow-up treatments would be necessary, but Will was committed. The dog was already trying to fit in, eager to behave despite its fear.

As he opened the door, the familiar, rich scent of Hannibal's cooking greeted him, the aroma filling the air with warmth. Will inhaled deeply, recognizing the smell of dinner that Hannibal must have reheated for him.

The tension in his chest eased slightly, and a small smile tugged at his lips when Zoe and Jack, his other dogs, rushed over to greet him and the new arrival.

The new dog, though hesitant, remained close to Will's side, unsure of the two eager canines. It stayed back, watching until Will told them all to sit. They obeyed instantly, making Will

chuckle as he showed the new dog where the food and water bowls were.

In the kitchen, as expected, was Hannibal. Will sighed quietly, knowing he wouldn't be able to slip past unnoticed.

Not that he really wanted to.

"You didn't have to do all this," Will said, stepping further inside. "I could've just thrown something together."

Hannibal, poised at the stove, didn't turn around but responded in his calmly. "I wanted to. For both of you."

Will's smile softened, already knowing that Hannibal had noticed the dog. Nothing escaped his alpha.

The dog, still on edge, cautiously padded into the room, its eyes wide with nervous curiosity. It kept its distance, sniffing the air and assessing the unfamiliar surroundings, while Zoe and Jack hovered at the kitchen's edge, watching it intently.

Sensing the invisible boundary of the kitchen, the new dog hesitated, then quietly retreated to a soft bed by the door, curling up with a yawn. Zoe and Jack simply waited, hoping for scraps.

Hannibal turned from the stove, his gaze briefly settling on the dog before flicking back to Will, one eyebrow raised slightly in amusement. "So, you did end up bringing home a guest." His voice was warm, but there was a glint of curiosity and amusement behind his eyes.

Will rubbed the back of his neck, knowing there was no avoiding it. "I found him at the scene. Or rather, he found us. Picked up the victim's eyes." He shrugged lightly, trying to explain. "No owner, riddled with infection," he added, glancing down. "They were going to put him down."

Hannibal's lips curved into a faint smile. "And so you paid for his treatment."

Will nodded, feeling a bit sheepish. "Yeah. He still needs more treatment, but… I couldn't just leave him there."

Hannibal regarded the dog for a moment, his eyes taking in the animal's cautious stance. "You seem to attract the most magnificent strays," he spoke, his tone soft but carrying that familiar, enigmatic edge. "There's something poetic about your instinct to save a creature that most would discard." He glanced back at Will, a true smile tugging at his lips. "But I'm hardly surprised."

Will smirked faintly, recognizing the layers of meaning in Hannibal's words. "He needed help."

Hannibal's eyes flickered a hint of understanding. "And now he has it."

Will watched as Hannibal stepped closer, his gaze shifting between him and the dog. Entertained by Will's need to care for something broken and abandoned. Will couldn't shake the feeling that Hannibal was, in his own way, drawing parallels.

"Well," Hannibal said, turning back to the stove, "I hope he has an appetite. He's in for quite a feast."

"You're going to spoil him," Will chuckled, already knowing Hannibal would never let any of them go hungry.

"It's not every day one finds a dog with such… refined tastes," Hannibal mused.

Will laughed. "Refined? He dropped them at my feet and wanted me to throw them. We're lucky he didn't swallow them."

Hannibal's smile grew, a wicked glint in his eye. "Acquiring a taste for human flesh at a crime scene? There are connoisseurs of far more mundane things."

Will smirked despite himself. "He didn't know what he was doing."

"Perhaps," Hannibal mused, his voice low and thoughtful, eyes lingering on the dog. "Or perhaps he was simply… following his instincts." His gaze shifted back to Will, sharp and laden with meaning. "We all have them, after all."

Will's smile turned faintly wry. "Well, at least I know he likes to play fetch. Maybe we'll get him some actual balls to throw instead of… you know."

Hannibal's laughter was soft. "Perhaps. Though, I think he might miss his… usual fare."

As Hannibal set the table for their late dinner, the dog moved, coming to lay between their seats.

"I must say, your new friend has quite an eye for detail," Hannibal remarked, his tone smooth and laced with playful amusement. "He certainly picked the most... unique part of the victim to retrieve."

Will smirked, catching the pun but pretending to ignore it as he sat down.

"One might say, he's got his sights set on becoming an aficionado of anatomy," Hannibal quipped.

Will looked up, amused in his own way. "Are you done?"

Hannibal gave a sly smile. He set the plate down in front of Will. “I simply find it hard to resist when the puns present themselves so... clearly.”

Will couldn’t help but huff out a laugh despite himself, shaking his head. “You’ve got way too much time on your hands.”

Hannibal’s smile remained, his eyes glinting with a certain satisfaction.

Hannibal poured a glass of wine, his movements graceful, every action deliberate. He glanced at Will, his expression unreadable.

“I heard news of the Ripper’s latest victim,” Hannibal began, his tone calm and conversational. “It was quite the talk today, especially regarding a certain... unexpected guest at the scene.” He set the bottle down and met Will’s eyes with a knowing look. “It seems the dog’s antics have become something of a joke among your colleagues.”

Will sighed, already anticipating where this was headed. “Most of them were laughing about it, yeah.”

Hannibal’s lips curved into a subtle smile, clearly amused. “I had suspected as much. When I heard the story, I expected you’d be home late... and that you might return with a new companion.”

Will raised an eyebrow. “You knew I’d bring him home?”

Hannibal’s smile widened, his voice laced with quiet amusement. “Given the circumstances, it was hardly a leap of logic. A dog retrieving part of the victim’s anatomy? You were never going to leave it behind after that. Besides,” he added, his eyes drifting to the dog, “I imagine you felt a certain... responsibility for him.”

Will looked down at the dog, feeling the weight of Hannibal’s words. “He didn’t deserve to be put down because of what happened. Or because he wasn’t well.”

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, his expression thoughtful. “No, he didn’t. And I must admit, after everything that transpired at the scene, I was curious to see how you would handle the situation.”

There was something in Hannibal’s voice, a hint of admiration beneath the amusement, and Will couldn’t help but feel the weight of his gaze. The dog stirred at his feet, oblivious to the layers of conversation passing above him.

“I must say,” Hannibal continued, his tone light, “I do appreciate the irony. While others laughed about the dog’s... unconventional retrieval, I found it rather poetic.” His eyes gleamed, the amusement deepening. “A creature with an taste for human flesh, choosing to follow you home.”

Will took a slow sip of his wine, eyes fixed on the glass as he mused aloud, “I have a habit of collecting strays.”

Hannibal’s gaze never wavered, studying him with that same quiet intensity.

“Are you going to bring up what it means?” Will asked, his voice measured but with a hint of curiosity, already knowing Hannibal had drawn his own conclusions.

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, his voice smooth. “Family.”

The word lingered in the air, weighty and deliberate.

“Deep down, you’ve always wanted one, Will.”

Will’s hand tightened slightly on the stem of the glass. He glanced down, not immediately responding, but Hannibal’s words struck something deep inside him.

He'd always known there was a longing there, buried beneath the layers of solitude and walls he'd built around himself. But to hear Hannibal say it so plainly, so directly felt like an intrusion into thoughts he rarely allowed himself to explore.

"I don't exactly fit the mould for family," Will replied quietly, his tone edging toward self-deprecation, though he knew Hannibal would see right through it. That Will yearned for a family.

Hannibal's smile was subtle but disarming. "Family is not bound by conventional definitions, Will. It's not always a matter of blood or tradition. Sometimes, it's forged by something… deeper." His eyes flicked to the dog at Will's feet before returning to Will. "A shared understanding. A connection born from instinct and necessity."

Part of Will wanted to protest, to claim that the idea of family, of connection, was something that eluded him. But here he was, sitting across from a man who seemed to know him better than he knew himself. An alpha that had bonded with him, despite seeing pieces that others ran from.

"Maybe," Will said, more to himself than to Hannibal, as he stared into the depths of his wine.

Hannibal's voice remained gentle but unwavering. "You collect strays, Will. Perhaps it's not about saving them. Perhaps it's about creating something you've long denied yourself." He leaned in ever so slightly, his eyes narrowing with a mixture of empathy and something more. "A family, of your own making."

Will swallowed, feeling the truth of Hannibal's words but unwilling to admit it aloud. He set down his glass, his eyes thoughtful as he considered Hannibal's words. "I didn't believe you wanted a family," he said quietly, his tone reflective, "at least not yet. Not while you're in the middle of changing careers."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow, curious but silent, waiting for Will to continue.

Will's gaze shifted to the dog curled up at his feet, as if searching for the right words. "I've been trying to make something of myself. I thought if I could build a life, find some stability, then maybe… maybe I could think about having a child." He hesitated, feeling vulnerable, as though speaking those words aloud made the idea all too real. "But I've never really been sure if I'd be any good at it. At family."

There was a raw honesty in his voice, an admission he hadn't even fully confronted himself until now. He felt as though he were teetering on the edge of something bigger, something that Hannibal had gently pushed him toward with his subtle observations.

As a child his mother had left him, never checking in on him. And his father hadn't been a doting dad, he'd seen a weak omega, broken and beyond repair.

Hannibal's eyes softened. "You underestimate yourself, Will. You're already shaping the life you claim to be unsure of. Stability is a concept, one that changes depending on what you value most."

Will looked up at him, a faint frown creasing his brow. "I just don't know if I'll ever be… enough. And even if I was… I don't know if I'd be able to protect a child from… everything that I deal with. Everything I am."

Hannibal studied him for a moment, his expression unreadable, before he spoke. "You've already proven, through your actions and choices, that you're capable of caring deeply. You're trying to make something of yourself, trying to create a life that can withstand the chaos you feel inside. But family isn't a reward at the end of that process, Will. It's part of the journey."

Will's frown deepened. "And what about you?" he asked, meeting Hannibal's gaze directly. "Do you even want that? A family? Or is this just another way of… giving me what I want?"

Hannibal's smile was sincere, his eyes glinting with something that made Will feel both exposed and understood. "Family, as you define it, may not have been my initial pursuit. But," Hannibal paused, his voice lowering slightly, "I am intrigued by the possibilities it offers."

There was a silence between them, thick with unspoken understanding. Will didn't know what the future held, but in that moment, he couldn't deny the pull of the life he was quietly building.

Hannibal broke the moment by taking a piece of heart from his plate, giving it to the new addition. "You haven't named him yet."

Will smiled at the obvious display of preferential treatment. "I couldn't think of anything fitting,"

"Hitomi." Hannibal spoke softly as the petted the dogs head.

"What does that mean?" Will tilted his head.

Hannibal set his glass down with deliberate precision, his gaze turning thoughtful. "In Japanese, hitomi refers to the pupil of the eye. More specifically, it is a poetic term for the reflection of the soul within the eye, that deep connection between vision and the inner self."

Will leaned back slightly, as if weighing the depth of his explanation.

"In some traditions, it is believed that the eyes don't just see, they reveal. They are windows to something far more profound." Hannibal finished, stroking the dogs head affectionately.

Will stared at him, already sensing there was more beneath the surface of Hannibal's words, something deeper at play. "And why bring this up now?"

Hannibal's smile was subtle, but his eyes were sharp, always assessing. "We were speaking of family, of connection, and of the dog's peculiar choice in trophies. The dog didn't just take any piece of the victim. It chose the eyes, the part of us that is said to reflect the essence of who we are."

Hannibal paused, his voice lowering into something more personal. “Perhaps, Will, in this new life you are trying to create, you are already beginning to see more clearly. Not just the world around you… but the truth within yourself.”

Will swallowed, there was something unsettlingly true about what he said. Hannibal wasn’t just talking about hitomi, he was talking about Will’s own own struggle to understand himself.

“And what am I supposed to see?” Will asked, his voice quieter now.

Hannibal’s eyes met his, steady and unwavering. “Only what you’ve been looking for all along. A sense of belonging, perhaps. A family, in its own way. The reflection of your soul.”

Will didn’t ask more.

Hannibal’s words, like so many things he said, lingered at the front of his mind, quietly gnawing at his thoughts. Will tried to shake it off as they finished their evening, but even as he went to bed, curled up next to Hannibal, something felt different.

The warmth of Hannibal’s presence, the way his arm draped protectively over Will, felt more intentional. There was always a certain possessiveness to Hannibal’s touch, but tonight, it felt as if something had shifted.

Will lay there in the quiet darkness, his mind racing, unable to shake the idea Hannibal had planted earlier.

The thought of him actually wanting a family, of the two of them building something together seemed both impossible and yet strangely beautiful.

It was a concept Will had never let himself fully entertain, but now that it had been voiced, it refused to leave.

Hannibal stirred slightly beside him, the steady rhythm of his breathing a grounding presence in the otherwise chaotic swirl of thoughts.

Will wondered if Hannibal had meant every word, if the man beside him, brilliant, and so unfathomably complex, truly desired something as mundane as a family. And more importantly, what would that even look like?

Could they ever have something so… normal?

Will shifted closer, as if seeking comfort in the one person who could complete him more than anyone else.

Hannibal's arm tightened slightly in response, and in that subtle gesture, Will felt the weight of everything unsaid. That they would be good parents, that their children would want for nothing.

Will fell asleep to the steady thrum of Hannibal's heart and scent calming him.

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Will swore under his breath as the call came in.

Another body had been found. The second Chesapeake Ripper victim, discovered just 26 hours after the first. The rapid pace made it clear that the Ripper was toying with them. He had the upper hand, and he knew it, forcing them to scramble and react while he remained three steps ahead.

Will, barely running on any sleep, felt the weight of it all bearing down on him. The few hours of rest he had managed the night before with Hannibal was a distant memory, replaced by a dull heaviness that clung to him.

Exhaustion clouded his thoughts, making it harder to focus, but he couldn't afford to stop. Not now. The Ripper wouldn't let them catch their breath, and Will knew he had to push through, even if it meant running himself into the ground.

Dave, standing nearby, was visibly annoyed, pacing as he scheduled patrols throughout the city. His frustration radiated through the room as officers scrambled to organize shifts and cover more ground.

"It's like he's daring us," Dave muttered, shaking his head in frustration. "And we're two steps behind."

"Three," Will corrected quietly, his eyes fixed on the reports on his desk.

"What?" Dave glanced over, confused.

"We're three steps behind," Will repeated, his voice heavy with exhaustion. "The autopsy for the first victim hasn't even come back yet. And our best source of evidence… was destroyed." His jaw tightened, recalling the chaos with Hitomi at the scene. Knowing he was at least now safe at home.

Dave gave a faint smirk, trying to lighten the tension. "We're still only two behind. You know the Ripper better than anyone, Will. You already know this latest victim was dead before we even found the first. I doubt he expected you to figure that out so quickly. That gives us some ground. He didn't just pick this one at random. It was planned long before."

Will's lips pressed into a thin line. "He probably anticipated you'd flood the streets with patrols too," he muttered, biting his bottom lip in thought.

Dave sighed, nodding. "Victim was found in a park, outskirts of town. Far from the first."

Will frowned, his mind racing. “Maybe this was his first victim all along. A delay in discovery.”

Dave shook his head firmly. “No chance. The garbage man called it in. Picked up a skip from there yesterday, brought it back this morning to find the body. The Ripper made sure it’d be found, on his terms. He wants us to see this.”

Will felt a chill creep over him. The Ripper wasn’t just planning his kills, he was scripting the entire narrative, making sure they played their roles.

Will didn’t respond, his mind already focused on the scene ahead. He grabbed his coat, his thoughts dark as he headed toward the door. The Ripper was pushing them too fast, too precise.

As he drove toward the scene, his stomach tightened. He already imagined the surgical precision, the artistry behind the carnage. Each victim a canvas for the Ripper’s morbid creativity. He was performing. And they were his audience.

When Will arrived at the scene, the atmosphere was heavy with tension. Officers moved cautiously, some exchanging uneasy glances. Will could already sense the familiar dread creeping up his spine. Another stage set for them. Another message waiting to be uncovered.

Stepping out of the car, Will took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for what awaited him.

Patrol cars lined the area, the police presence was almost obscene. But with the reporters nearby and news crews, Will could understand why. The cordoned off area was far from the scene, a screen placed up around the victim.

Will moved closer, watching the faces of those coming from behind the screen, an eerie stillness about them after what they had witnessed.

It didn’t take long for Will to understand why.

At first glance, the body looked like a scarecrow. The limbs jutted out at unnatural, jagged angles, as if the Ripper had posed it deliberately for effect.

The nose, lips, and ears had been meticulously removed, along with the tongue, leaving the face a hollow mask of mutilation.

But this time, the eyes remained, wide open, staring blankly into the void as if witnessing their own torment.

Will stood beside the body, the scene an eerie cruelty and precision. Every cut, every missing feature told a story.

The Ripper had left the eyes attached, every other feature removed. Unlike the last victim, where the eyes were on display, these were left intact, almost as if the Ripper wanted the victim to see everything afterwards.

He took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the scene bearing down on him, the Ripper's message elusive. There was purpose here, contained violence.

Will stared at the body, his mind racing as he tried to piece together the Ripper's intent.

The victim looked like a scarecrow, limbs twisted and awkward, the face mutilated into a grotesque, hollow mask.

Will's instincts told him there was more to this than just shock value-there was always meaning behind the Ripper's displays.

Dave, standing beside him, broke the silence.

"The Ripper's artistic, right? He turned the last victim into a sculpture. Maybe this one represents something too," he mused, eyeing the body with a frown. "Priapus, maybe?"

Will's brow furrowed. "Priapus?"

"Ugly, foul-minded, impotent. A symbol of deformity, of things going wrong. It's twisted, but it fits," Dave continued, his voice grim. "Look at how he's posed, like he's mocking something. The Ripper's not just killing these people. He's turning them into symbols."

Dave cleared his throat, glancing over at Will. “Priapus. He’s a minor god from Greek mythology. A bit of a joke, honestly. God of fertility, but impotent. Deformed, grotesque. He was known for being ugly and foul-minded. When Hera cursed him, she also made him with a ridiculous, oversized… well, let’s just say, it didn’t work.” He smirked grimly, gesturing to the victim’s twisted form. “Fits the bill, doesn’t it? All show, no function.”

Will listened carefully, eyes still on the body. It made a disturbing kind of sense. The Ripper was turning his victims into symbols, each kill more layered and twisted than the last.

Dave folded his arms, looking pleased with himself. “And for the record,” he added with a smirk, “you’re not the only one with fancy connections. I’ve got some classical education too. Not all of us are just chasing paperwork.”

Will raised an eyebrow, but he couldn’t help the slight twitch of a smile. Even in the midst of this grim discovery, Dave’s attempt to lighten the mood was oddly appreciated.

Will considered the idea.

"Priapus..." Will muttered, glancing at the blank, staring eyes. "The Ripper doesn't just kill. He makes them into something." He swallowed, realizing just how personal and dark the Ripper's mockery had become.

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The air was still, heavy with the quiet that falls just before night takes hold. Hannibal's car glided smoothly into the driveway, his eyes immediately catching the sight of Will's Continental already parked.

For a moment, he considered whether Will was inside or out on patrol, chasing shadows of the Chesapeake Ripper.

The thought lingered as Hannibal stepped out of his car, the crisp evening air biting faintly at his skin.

As Hannibal crossed the threshold into the house, his mind stayed focused on Will.

Envisioning him here, not just now, but in the future, perhaps with a child.

The thought, once distant and abstract, had begun to take shape in his mind.

He could picture Will with a child, their child, a perfect blend of both their worlds. A family born from their bond, bound by shared understanding and an unspoken darkness.

But that dream could only be realized when Will fully grasped his own nature.

Hannibal knew Will was still grappling with it, still trying to understand the darkness that simmered just beneath the surface of his empathy.

In time, though, Will would see. He would come to embrace what Hannibal already knew to be true: that the darkness wasn't something to fear, but something to wield, something that could unite them in ways deeper than either of them had ever imagined.

Hannibal moved through the house quietly, contemplating the future. He imagined Will holding their child, teaching them, guiding them with the same sharp intellect and fierce compassion that made Will who he was. But this vision was still far off. It would only come to pass when Will was ready, when he could accept all that Hannibal was and all that he himself was destined to become.

For now, Hannibal would wait. Patience was something he had mastered long ago. He would continue to guide Will, carefully, until the day came when Will saw the truth in himself and embraced the darkness as Hannibal had. Only then could they begin to truly build their future.

Three dogs sat at the edge of the study as Hannibal stepped closer.

Will was in the centre, surrounded by a maze of open books on Greek mythology.

They were strewn across the desk and chairs, each one flipped to a different page, all depicting the various gods and their stories.

Will sat hunched over the desk, scribbling notes on a scrap of paper, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. The quiet rustle of Hannibal's entrance didn't even cause him to look up.

Hannibal's eyes scanned the room, taking in the organized chaos.

It was clear Will was trying to make sense of the Ripper's latest work, connecting the mutilations to ancient symbols, to gods with dark meanings.

He approached quietly, observing the page Will was studying, a section on Priapus, no doubt related to the latest victim.

"You've been busy," Hannibal remarked smoothly, his voice gentle but intrigued.

Will looked up, blinking, as if only just realizing Hannibal had entered the room. “I’m trying to figure out the pattern,” Will muttered, glancing back at his notes. “The Ripper’s using these… symbols. Priapus, and maybe others. He’s mocking them, turning them into something else.”

Hannibal stepped closer, his eyes gliding over the notes Will had made, sparse but careful. “A fascinating direction, using the gods to convey deeper meaning,” Hannibal said thoughtfully, his voice laced with curiosity. “The Ripper seems to be crafting his kills with an almost mythological precision. His art speaks to ancient ideas of power, deformity, and the grotesque.”

Will frowned, tapping his pen absently against the paper. “But why these gods? What is he trying to say with each one? There’s a purpose, but it’s just out of reach.”

Hannibal smiled softly, admiring Will’s intense focus. “Perhaps you’re closer to understanding him than you realize.”

“Or maybe he’s just mocking us all again.” Will muttered.

“Why this victim,” Hannibal redirected.

“Maybe the Ripper saw through it,” Will muttered to himself, his pen hovering over the paper. “He wasn’t mocking the man’s life… but the lie of it.”

Will stared down at his notes, a thought creeping into his mind. Was the Ripper mocking the victim? Not just in the grotesque way he mutilated him, but in a deeper, more symbolic sense.

The victim had been someone people admired, flocked to for his beauty and apparent brilliance. But beneath that veneer, he was nothing more than a rich, foul-mannered man. Will had learned this from police arrest reports. Petty charges, disorderly conduct, even assault. None of it ever stuck. The man had always paid off the officers, bought his way out of accountability.

“He was nothing more than a well dressed asshole. A fraud.” Will muttered.

Hannibal, still standing nearby, watched Will with quiet fascination, sensing the connection forming in his mind. “An intriguing possibility,” Hannibal said softly. “The Ripper’s method could be his way of stripping away the facade. Revealing the truth behind the public persona.”

Will frown deepened. “He turned the victim into Priapus, ugly, impotent, stripped of any dignity. Maybe it’s how the Ripper saw him all along… just another fraud hiding behind wealth.”

The pieces started to align in Will’s mind, a clearer picture forming. The Ripper wasn’t just killing for sport. He was using his victims as canvases to expose their hidden truths.

In his own twisted way, the Ripper believed he was revealing what the world refused to see. And in doing so, perhaps performing a public service.

Hannibal leaned against the desk, observing Will’s growing frustration as he sifted through the scattered books.

After a moment of silence, Hannibal asked with a hint of amusement, “Shouldn’t you be at the precinct? Working with the task force?”

Will let out an exasperated sigh, running a hand through his hair. “They won’t let me help with patrols,” he grumbled. “Said I’m ‘more useful here,’ working profiles and going over evidence. But I can’t just sit around doing nothing.”

Hannibal’s lips curved into a small, knowing smile. “So, instead of resting, you’ve turned to studying Greek mythology to better understand the Ripper’s mind?”

Will nodded, glaring down at his notes. “If he’s using these ancient gods as part of his… artistic statement, then I need to figure out why. What he’s saying with each kill. Maybe then, I can get ahead of him.”

Hannibal moved closer, his tone thoughtful. “Greek mythology offers rich, symbolic narratives. The gods were often vain, flawed, and cruel. Not unlike the Ripper’s perception of his victims, it seems.”

Will snorted. “Yeah, well, it’s a good place to start, anyway. I just don’t know if I’m getting any closer, or if I’m just chasing shadows.”

Hannibal’s gaze lingered on Will for a moment, his expression inscrutable. “You’re on the right path, Will. The Ripper thrives on complexity. By untangling his symbols, you’re already much closer to understanding him than anyone else.”

Will muttered under his breath, his eyes fixed on the scattered books. “I don’t even understand myself half the time,” he admitted, his voice low and distant. “But when I’m in the Ripper’s mind… everything’s calm. It’s like I’m surrounded by beauty and swine. The worst of humanity, dressed up in elegance.”

Hannibal’s gaze sharpened, his interest piqued. “Calm?” he echoed, his voice almost a whisper. “You find peace in the mind of the Chesapeake Ripper?”

Will shrugged, frowning as if he wasn’t sure what disturbed him more. The thought itself or the truth behind it. “It’s twisted, I know. But when I look at his work, when I think like him, it’s like the chaos of everything else fades. He sees the world as it really is rotten underneath all the wealth and beauty. And somehow, that makes sense to me.”

Hannibal studied Will’s face for a long moment, intrigued by the admission. “Perhaps,” he said carefully, “it’s not so much that you’re in his mind, but that, in seeing the world through his eyes, you find a certain… clarity. A place where the masks of civility fall away, and the truth is laid bare.”

Will met his gaze, a flicker of unease crossing his features. “Maybe. Or maybe I’m just as messed up as he is.”

Hannibal’s expression softened, though his eyes remained intense. He stepped closer, his voice low but firm. “Will,” he said, the words carrying a weight of certainty. “Your empathy is your greatest strength, not a flaw. The fact that you can step into the mind of the Ripper and see what others cannot does not make you like him. It makes you more capable of understanding the truth beneath the surface.”

Will’s brow furrowed as he looked away, his hands fidgeting with the edge of the paper on the desk. “It doesn’t feel like a strength. It feels like I’m losing myself in it.”

Hannibal reached out, placing a steady hand on Will’s shoulder, grounding him Knowing it was a lie, Will was connecting pieces of the Ripper to himself. Denying the connections between them. “What you’re feeling is the burden of seeing what others are blind to. You are surrounded by the ugliness of humanity, and yet you seek to find meaning in it, to make sense of it. That is not a weakness. It’s a testament to your resilience.”

Will glanced back at Hannibal, his expression still conflicted, but there was a flicker of gratitude in his eyes. Hannibal’s unwavering confidence in him, in his ability to navigate the darkness without being consumed by it, was a rare anchor in the storm of his mind. “Maybe,” Will muttered, though his voice held less doubt this time.

Quietly, Hannibal wrapped his arms around Will from behind, drawing him closer. The soft texture of Will’s hair brushed against his cheek, and Hannibal instinctively tucked a stray curl behind Will’s ear, his fingers lingering there a moment longer than necessary.

Will turned his head slightly, meeting Hannibal’s gaze with a mixture of affection and determination. “I appreciate it, but I really need to work on this,” he said, his tone both apologetic and resolute.

Hannibal felt a tug of disappointment, but he smiled, pressing a soft kiss to Will’s cheek. “Just a moment longer,” he murmured, his breath warm against Will’s skin. Inhaling his scent, memorising each note that mixed with the shampoo and conditioner he had carefully selected to elevate the verbeena.

Lips met Will's own, soft and pliant. Cinnamon bursting on Hannibal's tongue. "When was the last time you ate?" Hannibal spoke quietly.

Will's cheeks flushed, and his eyes went back down to the books. "Breakfast," Will mumbled.

"I'll prepare something light for you," Hannibal murmured.

Reluctantly, Will nodded, returning his attention to the files as Hannibal moved to the kitchen.

He relished the routine of caring for Will, finding solace in the simple act of preparing a meal. As he worked, he contemplated Will's relentless pursuit of understanding, wishing to ease the burdens weighing on his mind. But Will needed to find the answers on his own, despite the hints Hannibal left, to come home and discover Will deep in his study and learning of the Greek Gods was breathtaking. Learning of the gods capricious natures and complexities, much like Hannibal himself.

It was easy to cook something light, searing strips of beef from the very victim Will had seen and serving on a bed of salad.

The last element to add was a drink, and Hannibal ensured he picked something suitable.

Tea was something Will hadn't indulged in, preferring his coffee in the morning and whiskey in the evening when he thought he was alone. Wine when he dined with Hannibal.

Hannibal boiled water for tea, selecting a calming blend, and then discreetly added a sedative to the cup, ensuring it would go unnoticed with the strong scent. He wanted Will to rest, but he also needed Will to be occupied while he placed the last body of his tableau.

With the tray carefully balanced, Hannibal returned to the study, the aroma of the tea wafting through the air. He set the tray down on the desk beside Will, who looked up, momentarily distracted from his work.

“Dinner is served,” Hannibal announced, his tone light, but his gaze steady. He leaned closer, placing a hand on Will’s shoulder, a subtle reminder of his presence. “You must take care of yourself.”

Will hesitated, glancing between the tray and his papers. “I really shouldn’t—”

“For a moment at least,” Hannibal insisted softly, his voice a soothing balm. “You deserve a break.”

Will finally relented, his shoulders relaxing as he reached for the cup. He took a sip, giving a brief smile before reaching for the plate of food, though he remained unaware of the sedative that work its way into his system with each sip.

“Thank you,” Will said, his voice softer now, a hint of weariness creeping into his tone.

Hannibal smiled, his heart swelling with affection as he watched Will savor the meal, hoping the combination of warmth and calm would soon lull him into a state of rest.

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Will stood in the study, the quiet ticking of the clock echoing through the still house.

The books on Greek mythology were still scattered across the desk, their pages filled with symbols and names swirling in his mind. Priapus, Apollo, Dionysus.

Each held fragments of meaning, but none gave him the full answer he was searching for. His thoughts felt incomplete, just out of reach, like the solution was hiding behind a veil he

couldn’t quite lift.

His gaze drifted to the untouched cup of tea Hannibal had brought him earlier, the steam long gone. No doubt it was a calming blend, meant to lull him into restful sleep. Hannibal had hoped to coax him to bed.

But not tonight.

Will had never been a fan of herbal infusions anyway.

He preferred the bite of peat whiskey, the earthy smolder of it, warming him from the inside, settling the unease in his bones.

Now, in the the early hours of the morning, the kind of time when shadows stretched and distorted, taking on lives of their own.

A familiar restlessness gnawed at him, urging him from within. He couldn’t sleep, not with the Chesapeake Ripper still out there, toying with them.

If he went to bed, Hannibal would be waiting, his presence warm and steady, a place of comfort. But Will couldn’t bring himself to lie beside him tonight.

It felt wrong.

It felt like a betrayal, not to Hannibal, but to the battle raging inside him.

One that neither man could see clearly, but both claimed him in their own way. The Ripper on one side, Hannibal on the other.

Both possessive, both relentless.

Quietly, he slipped on his jacket, grabbing his keys with a glance at the darkened street outside.

The thought of Hannibal asleep, serene while Will's mind churned with chaotic thoughts, made him feel like an outsider in his own life. Maybe Hannibal understood this restlessness.

Either way, Will needed to leave.

To move.

To hunt.

The night air hit him as he stepped outside, cool and biting against his skin, heightening his senses. Will moved with purpose, the sound of the car engine cutting through the silence as he drove through empty streets.

He didn't have a specific destination in mind at first, but his instincts led him somewhere familiar.

A local park.

It wasn't far, just on the outskirts of the city, and its centrepiece was a fountain of stone statues with water spilling into the large pool below.

As Will parked and stepped out of the car, a chill ran through him despite the stillness of the night.

The park was bathed in a silvery glow from the moon, the fountain in the distance glistening under the pale light. He moved toward it, the gravel of the small walking path crunching softly under his feet.

The tranquility of the park was unsettling, an eerie calm that seemed out of place. No rustling leaves, no distant hum of the city.

Just silence.

It was as if the night itself was holding its breath, waiting.

Will stared into the park's surrounds, his mind racing with possibilities, an eerie reminder of the first victim who was just to the east of this park.

He knew the Ripper was out there, somewhere. And yet, it was here, in the quiet solitude of this park, that Will felt closest to him. Like he could feel the Ripper's presence hovering just out of reach.

He was stepping into the Ripper’s mind, trying to predict his next move, trying to understand him on a level that would disturb most. But Will felt a pull, like the Ripper was calling to him.

He closed his eyes, letting the sound of the water wash over him, as though it was pulling him into a stream. It was comforting, like the quiet of a stream. A memory of when he was just a child, casting a line to catch a fish, happy when he felt it pull, knowing he would eat for the night.

For a moment, he wondered what the Ripper would see. His thoughts to the statues in the middle, the beauty of them. Praising Gods who were not only kind to them, but brutal as well.

He had been right to leave, to come here instead of surrendering to sleep. The Ripper thrived in these moments, in the quiet spaces where others wouldn't think to look.

And Will... Will was the only one who could truly see him, even in places like this, where beauty met brutality.

Maybe this was what Hannibal had seen in him all along, the darkness, the hunger to understand.

It was the fountain that caught Will's attention, unnervingly still under the moonlight.

The statues around it cast long shadows, their reflections in the water giving the eerie illusion of movement. For a moment, Will could almost believe the figures were shifting, watching him. His pulse quickened, a sense of foreboding creeping in as he moved closer. The water, so calm and dark, seemed to hide something beneath its surface.

This place, with its classical design, would appeal to the Ripper's sense of artistry, wouldn't it? A carefully staged body, framed by this scene... it would fit his twisted aesthetic.

Will stepped closer to the edge of the fountain, his breath catching as he noticed the statues in more detail. The fountain had been silent, the water off, its once serene nature muted in the night. But now, without warning, the fountain sputtered to life.

At first, Will only registered the gentle sound of the water flowing, but then he froze. The water wasn't clear. It ran dark, red like blood, swirling around the base of the fountain.

His pulse quickened, a knot forming in his stomach. The air around him seemed to thicken, the quiet park suddenly filled with an oppressive weight.

He didn't think.

Instinct kicked in as his hand reached for his gun, drawing it without hesitation.

Will moved forward, stepping into the shallow water of the fountain without care for the soaked fabric clinging to his legs. Shoe's submerged as though he was stepping into a sea of blood.

His eyes scanned the shadows, his mind trying to process whether this was a trick, a sick joke, or something far worse.

As his gaze locked onto the statue at the centre of the fountain, he saw movement, a figure stepping out from behind the stone form.

Will's grip on the gun tightened as he called out, "Stop!"

The figure emerged, and the familiar silhouette came into view.

Will's breath hitched, his voice faltering as he called out, "Hannibal?"

The name escaped his lips weakly, almost disbelieving. His gun remained trained on the figure, his hands trembling slightly as his mind raced to make sense of the scene in front of him.

From the shadows, Hannibal emerged.

His movements were deliberate, calm, as though the macabre scene before them, blood and stone intertwined in grotesque beauty that was perfectly natural.

Will's heart pounded in his chest, his grip tightening around his gun, but his body refused to act.

Hannibal's face remained unreadable, a mask of perfect composure, yet the tension between them was palpable.

The world around Will blurred, the gruesome reality of what he was witnessing slipping away like water through his fingers.

Everything felt distant, like a fever dream, except for Hannibal, who stood before him, real and undeniablely the Chesapeake Ripper.

“Hannibal,” Will repeated, his voice barely above a whisper, as he stood there, gun still raised, caught between disbelief and the horrifying reality of what this meant.

“Hello, Will,”

Chapter End Notes

Yes I love leaving people on a cliff hanger!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I didn’t leave you hanging for long

Will's breath came in short, shallow bursts as he stepped closer, the blood-red water swirling around his feet. Shoes drenched and the cold creeping up his legs from the water.

Hannibal came into clearer view, and the horror of the scene fully revealed itself.

A body lay splayed open on a once empty stand, its chest cavity exposed, heart connected to a network of tubes, pumping the crimson liquid that now ran through the fountain.

A serene beautiful fountain, meant to represent the heart beating life to the body. The long hair of the victim ran down over her shoulders, head tilted back as she looked to the heavens.

Will felt awe, then bile rising in his throat. His mind struggling to process the truth that laid in front of him.

The sharp, metallic scent of blood filled the air, mixing with the familiar scent of Hannibal’s. His hands shook as he aimed his gun, the weight of the moment pressing down on him like a vice.

Hannibal stood still, his face calm and composed in front of his work of art.

There was no panic, no guilt in his expression. Instead, there was a strange sense of serenity, as if this was the culmination of something inevitable.

"You," Will choked out, voice thick with disbelief and anger. "You did this."

Hannibal met his gaze, his eyes soft. "Yes," he said quietly, his voice as smooth. "If anyone was ever going to catch me, it was always going to be you, Will."

Will’s mind reeled. His heart raced as he struggled to reconcile the man he had trusted, loved and bonded with, compared to the monster standing before him.

It wasn’t real.

It couldn’t be real. He couldn’t believe that Hannibal, the man he had spent so much time with, could be capable of such depravity.

"No," Will muttered, shaking his head, his voice breaking. "No, you... you can't be the Ripper." But the evidence was right there in front of him, the body, the blood, Hannibal’s admission.

Hannibal stepped forward, unafraid of the gun in Will’s trembling hand.

Will didn’t move, he couldn’t.

"You knew, Will. You've always known, deep down.” His voice was gentle, as though he were sharing a deep truth, a revelation. “You saw me, and I see the truth you deny even to yourself. You are the only person who could ever understand me."

Will’s throat constricted as his world came crashing down. He didn’t want to believe it. He couldn’t. But everything made sense now, the precision, the artistry, the knowledge.

All of it pointed to Hannibal, and somewhere in the back of his mind, Will had always known. He'd just never wanted to connect the dots.

"I don't—" Will's voice cracked, tears stinging the corners of his eyes. "I don't want to understand this. I don't want to understand… You!"

Hannibal's expression softened, a hint of sadness in his eyes. "You already do," he whispered. "You've always understood, Will. That's why you're here. That's why you came." He took another step closer, his voice hypnotic. "You see the beauty in what I do, in what I create. You're drawn to it, just as I am."

Will's grip tightened on the gun, but his resolve wavered. His training screamed at him to pull the trigger, to end it, but his body wouldn't obey. His heart couldn't allow him to pull the trigger.

"I don't want this," Will whispered, his voice breaking. "I don't want any of this."

Hannibal's eyes never left Will's, his voice soft and almost tender. "But this is who we are."

Will lowered the gun slightly. "How... how did I miss it?" Will murmured, his voice strained, as if he were speaking more to himself than to Hannibal. He searched his memories, desperately seeing the clues he had overlooked, the signs he had refused to see.

How could he have been so blind?

Hannibal's face etched with something akin to sympathy, tilting his head. "You didn't miss it, Will," he said softly, taking another careful step closer, as if Will were a fragile creature on the edge of breaking. "I worked very hard to deceive you." His tone held no malice, only a quiet acknowledgment of the lengths he had gone to, of the meticulous care he had taken in constructing the mask he wore.

Will's heart sank further. "All that time," he muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "All that time I trusted you. I believed in the best of you." His voice cracked, anger and hurt intertwining. "You were right there... and I didn't see it."

Hannibal regarded him with a calm intensity, his gaze never wavering. "I didn't want you to see it. Not yet." His voice was measured, almost soothing, as though he were offering an explanation that would somehow ease the pain. "I needed you to know the best of me, before you saw... this part of me."

Will looked away, trying to swallow the bitter taste in his mouth, the realization that Hannibal had been manipulating him from the very beginning. "You played me," he whispered, his voice heavy with anguish. "All this time... you were playing me."

Hannibal's expression became pained slightly, his voice low and sincere. "No, Will. I was never playing you. I've never lied to you about who I am. I've only ever wanted you to see it for yourself, when you were ready."

Will's eyes snapped back to Hannibal, anger flashing in the depths of his blue gaze. "Ready?!" he spat. "You think I'd ever be ready for this?" He gestured to the grotesque scene in front of him, the blood, the body, the horror of it all. "You think I'd ever be ready to see you like this?"

Hannibal didn't flinch, didn't recoil from Will's outburst. Instead, he simply watched, letting the silence settle between them before speaking again. "I knew you'd understand, in time," he said softly. "I knew that once you saw me, truly saw me, you'd understand that this is part of me. Just as the darkness that is a part of you."

Will's breath hitched, the words cutting deeper than he wanted to admit. "I'm not like you," he whispered, though the conviction in his voice faltered. "I'm nothing like you!"

Hannibal took another step forward, close enough now that Will could feel the warmth of his breath, the unsettling calm that radiated from him. "You see the beauty in it, Will. You see the order in the chaos, the artistry in what others call violence." His voice was gentle, coaxing. "You understand it because you know that same darkness."

Will's stomach churned, his mind screaming at him to reject everything Hannibal was saying, but a small, treacherous part of him couldn't help but recognize the truth in those words.

He had always been drawn to the darkness, fascinated by it, even when he tried to deny it.

"I didn't want to deceive you, Will," Hannibal continued, his voice low, almost intimate. "But I knew you had to come to this realization on your own. And now... you have."

Will's grip tightened around the gun, his knuckles white, his chest heaving with the weight of the choice he didn't want to make.

He could feel Hannibal's gaze on him, patient, waiting for his next move. Part of him wanted to pull the trigger, to end it, to stop the madness. But the other part, the part Hannibal had nurtured, the part that understood, kept him frozen in place.

"Why me?" Will asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "Why did it have to be me?"

Hannibal's eyes softened, a rare flicker of genuine emotion crossing his face. "Because, from the moment we met, there was no other. You and I were always meant to be."

Will swallowed hard, his head shaking with disbelief as he felt his heart shattering. Then, in a shaky voice, he asked the question that had long haunted him. The one he had never understood.

"What did you do with them?" Will's eyes flicked to the mutilated body, then back to Hannibal, dreading the answer. "The trophies… What did you do with them?"

Hannibal, stood still. His voice was smooth, almost comforting, as though they were discussing something mundane. "I kept them, of course. They were a part of my art. A reminder of what I created."

Will's mind raced, thoughts churning with memories, fragmented pieces of conversations and dinners shared between them, and it hit him with chilling clarity. He felt his stomach twist as a horrible realization began to form, clawing its way to the surface.

"We didn't just keep them, did we?" Will's voice wavered, a sickening understanding creeping in as he met Hannibal's gaze. His throat tightened, stomach revolting as his mind pieced together where the victims had been all along.

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, a ghost of a smile playing at the corners of his lips, as if he were waiting for Will to say it.

Will's breath hitched. "We… ate them." The words fell from his lips like poison, his stomach churning with disgust, and yet a small part of him wasn't as shocked as he thought he'd be. The exquisite meals, the elegant dinners, it all came flooding back. Each course, each carefully selected cut of meat.

Hannibal bowed his head, his voice strange intimate. "It was part of our communion, Will. You've savored them without knowing it, appreciating their new found beauty and their essence." He watched Will's reaction carefully, his eyes gleaming with an unsettling affection.

"How could you…?" Will whispered, his voice hoarse, the weight of the betrayal crashing over him like a wave. His body screamed to reject it, but his mind… his mind kept pulling him deeper into the dark web of understanding.

"I shared my world with you, Will," Hannibal said softly, stepping even closer, his voice soothing yet terrifying. "Because you are the only one capable of truly understanding it. Of seeing the beauty in what others would call grotesque."

Will staggered back, his breath quickening, struggling to distance himself from both Hannibal and the terrible truth. But deep down, he couldn't deny the pull, the dark connection they shared. Even in the midst of this horror, part of him did understand.

And that was what frightened him the most.

Hannibal followed, reaching out and gently brushing a stray lock of Will's hair from his forehead, his touch tender despite the grotesque reality surrounding them. "You see it, don't you? You always have."

"I never wanted this," Will whispered, his voice broken, but Hannibal's gaze remained steady, as if he had known all along that Will would come to this moment. "We were happy!"

"You believed you were happy But it's a part of you now," Hannibal replied softly. "It's always been a part of you. Just as it is a part of me."

Will's hands shook, his head spinning as he tried to reconcile the man he thought he knew with the monster standing before him. Torn between disgust and a sickening acceptance. He couldn't deny the bond they had, but to admit that he had willingly participated in this… was too much to bear.

Will's heart raced, his mind a storm of conflicting emotions. He knew, deep down, that there was only one course of action left. He had to turn Hannibal in.

Hannibal was the Chesapeake Ripper, there could be no more hesitation, no more lingering in the shadows of moral ambiguity.

"I have to stop you," Will said quietly, his voice tight with regret. "I have to turn you in."

But as he looked into Hannibal's eyes, he saw something chilling. Hannibal knew what he was thinking.

And Hannibal would never let him do it.

Hannibal's gaze softened, a glint of affection, even sadness, flickering in his eyes. "You know that's not possible, Will," he said, his voice smooth and unhurried. "They'll condemn you in

my place. They'll never understand our bond... how deep the connection truly is."

Will gripped the gun tighter, but before he could make a move, Hannibal was already a step ahead.

In a fluid, graceful motion, Hannibal's hand came up, faster than Will anticipated, his fingers closing around the barrel of the gun with terrifying precision.

In one seamless movement, he plucked it from Will's hand. Holding it steady as the barrel now pointed at Will.

"I can't let you betray me, Will," Hannibal said softly, almost regretfully. His eyes locked onto Will's, filled with a cold kind of love. "You were never meant for them, only for me."

Will barely had time to react as Hannibal aimed.

The shot rang out in the stillness of the night, the force of the impact sending Will stumbling backward, pain erupting in his shoulder. He cried out, clutching at the wound as his vision blurred from the shock.

Hannibal stepped forward, catching Will before he collapsed completely, carrying him from the fountain to lay on the ground with almost tender care. His face hovered close, his breath warm against Will's ear as he whispered, "I won't kill you, Will. But I can't let you leave me, not like this."

Blood seeped through Will's fingers as he pressed against the wound, gasping for breath, his mind reeling from the suddenness of it all.

Hannibal's hand brushed across his cheek, a gesture of care, even now despite his actions.

“You’ll heal,” Hannibal murmured, his voice calm and soothing, as if nothing was wrong. “And when you do, we’ll talk again. But for now, you need to rest.”

Will’s vision dimmed, the pain in his shoulder growing distant as his body began to shut down, the adrenaline fading.

Soft lips pressed to Will’s forehead, then down to their bond.

Hannibal stood over him, a dark and looming presence, his face unreadable but his intentions clear. He would not let Will go, not until he was ready to accept everything.

As the sharp, searing pain spread through Will's shoulder, there was something else that he felt, something deeper, something he hadn’t expected.

It wasn’t just his own agony or the physical shock of being shot.

It was the overwhelming sensation of Hannibal’s heart breaking alongside his own.

For a moment, their eyes met, and the world seemed to still.

Hannibal’s face was not one of victory or cold satisfaction. There was pain in those dark eyes, a silent anguish that Will had never seen before. Hannibal wasn’t just asserting control; he was suffering, too.

In that fleeting moment, Will realized their connection ran far deeper than he had ever understood. It wasn’t simply about manipulation or some twisted form of admiration. No, this was something primal, something ancient and unbreakable.

They weren’t just connected through their bond like most alphas and omegas.

They were true mates, bound in a way that transcended the moral lines Will had been clinging to.

As Hannibal left, Will recalled every soft touch, in every word Hannibal murmured. Despite everything, the violence, the lies, the manipulation, Hannibal couldn’t bear to lose him.

The shot was not just to stop Will from turning him in; it was Hannibal's way of keeping him close, ensuring their bond would remain intact, even if it meant causing him harm. It was Hannibal’s own way of saving Will.

Will’s mind raced, trying to reconcile the horror with the strange, undeniable truth now laid bare before him.

He could feel Hannibal’s guilt, his heartbreak woven into the very act of pulling the trigger. Hannibal hadn’t wanted to hurt him.

And yet, there was no other choice.

Will’s vision blurred, his heart pounding in time with Hannibal’s, as though their very souls were in sync. The darkness in them was shared, and now, so was the weight of it. Hannibal was right, no one else could ever truly understand him the way Will did.

And in that moment, as Will’s body faltered and the pain faded to a dull throb, he finally understood the truth that had been lingering just beneath the surface all along.

They weren’t just tied together by fate or circumstance. They were bound by something far more profound.

They were two halves of the same whole, true mates, in every sense of the word.

Will's last conscious thought before he slipped into darkness was not of anger, nor fear, but of the inescapable pull that Hannibal always seemed to have over him, and how, even now, it was impossible to break free.

-

"You felt it too, didn't you?" Hannibal whispered, his voice low, filled with a tenderness that cut through Will's pain. "This... us. We're the same, Will."

Will gave a weak nod.

"Will! For fucks sake!" Dave yelled. "Where are the fucking paramedics?!"

Will blinked, Hannibal's face vanishing as blinding red and blue lights made him flinch, his shoulder was hot with blood, stinging from the gun shot.

"Did you get him?!" Dave asked, their eyes meeting. "Did you shoot the Ripper?"

Will felt his throat tighten, flinching at the memory. "I couldn't… couldn't pull the trigger."

"Probably got the jump on you," Dave glanced back.

Will grunted. "Where's Hannibal?"

"Haven't called him yet, my first priority is getting you into hospital." Dave spoke quickly. "I'll call him, I promise."

"No," Will shook his head, heart racing as he remembered the look in Hannibal's eyes, the pain in his chest that made his vision dim. "No, don't, I don't …"

-

When Will woke after the surgery, he listened to the steady beat of the monitor, the hospital room was bathed in a soft light.

His shoulder throbbed beneath layers of bandages, but the medication dulled the sharpest edges of the pain.

It was a haze, half memory, half confusion. Drifting in and out of consciousness as reality slowly set in.

The events that led him here remained fragmented in his mind, but one thing was certain: he wasn't alone.

Hannibal was there.

He sat beside the bed, watching him with the same quiet intensity he always had.

There was no sign of guilt or remorse in Hannibal's expression, only a protective gaze as he held Will's hand, the warmth of his touch offering an odd sense of comfort amidst the disorientation.

For a moment, Will didn't pull away. He lay there, staring up at the ceiling, feeling the tension in the air, knowing what Hannibal had done to him, and yet... Hannibal was still here.

Guarding him.

Then, as the memories started to come back, the body, the blood, the gunshot.

Slowly, Will moved his hand away, fingers slipping from Hannibal’s grasp to severe the touch. He turned his head, staring out the window, unable to face the man beside him.

The silence stretched between them, heavy and thick. Will could feel Hannibal’s presence lingering, refusing to leave even though he had pulled away.

Hannibal didn’t speak. He didn’t try to explain himself, didn’t try to force Will into accepting what had happened between them. He simply stayed, guarding the room, creating a barrier between Will and the outside world.

Will could hear muffled voices in the hallway, the distant sounds of nurses and doctors going about their duties. He knew the police were waiting. They wanted answers, explanations, what had happened at the fountain, what had led to the gunshot wound. But they wouldn’t get to him. Not yet.

Hannibal wasn’t going to let them.

The moment the police tried to enter Will's hospital room, Hannibal rose from his seat, his movements calm yet undeniably commanding. His eyes, dark and piercing, settled on the lead officer with a chilling finality.

"I'm afraid I cannot allow you to speak with him," Hannibal said, his voice smooth, every word sharp with authority.

The officers exchanged uneasy glances. "Dr. Lecter, we need to question him. He’s a key witness to the Chesapeake Ripper case, and—"

Hannibal cut him off, stepping closer, his presence enveloping the room with an air of dominance. "Will is in no condition to speak with anyone. His body and mind are both recovering. I won't let you jeopardize that." His tone held no room for argument, no space for compromise.

The officer squared his shoulders, attempting to stand his ground. To assert his alpha status. "With all due respect, Doctor, this is a criminal investigation, and you don't have the authority to decide when—"

"I am his alpha," Hannibal's voice dropped to a menacingly low growl. "Will is my mate and I will not allow him to be disturbed."

One of the officers, growing more frustrated, attempted to move past Hannibal, but he stepped in their way. His posture was still calm, yet something predatory flickered in his eyes. "Do not mistake my civility for weakness. Will's well-being comes before your need for answers."

The officer's hand hovered near his radio, but Hannibal's stare froze him in place. "He's just been through an ordeal. You barge in here now, and you will only confuse and disorient him further. You will not rush this," Hannibal's voice was a velvet-covered blade. "And I will not allow you to interrogate him like a criminal."

"Dr. Lecter, this isn't about—"

"Do you think he'll tell you anything you don't already know?" Hannibal's lips curled ever so slightly, almost amused. "I will decide when he is ready to speak until he can make his own decisions."

The officers hesitated, uncertain how to proceed knowing they would anger an alpha and potentially cause a fight to ensue.

They knew they couldn't simply push past Hannibal. He was more than a respected psychiatrist; his word carried weight, not just with Will but with everyone who knew him. His calculated composure, the sheer force of his presence, made it clear that crossing him would not end well.

"He needs time," Hannibal added, softening his tone slightly as if offering a moment of grace. "You will wait. And when he is ready, if he wishes to speak with you, it will be on his terms."

The police stood there for a moment, visibly weighing their options. Finally, the lead officer took a step back. "We'll be back," he said, his voice strained but conceding for now.

Hannibal inclined his head slightly, a barely-there smile flickering across his lips as he watched them retreat down the hallway. He then returned to Will's bedside, the earlier confrontation nothing but a passing distraction to him. His gaze softened as he watched Will's chest rise and fall, the battle between what the world demanded and what Will needed clear in Hannibal's mind.

He had bought them time. Time for Will to understand, to choose. Time for the bond between them to solidify, unchallenged by the outside world. Hannibal sat back down beside Will, content to let the world wait.

He was giving Will something that was more valuable than any explanation or apology. He was giving him time. Time to process, time to heal, time to figure out what came next.

Hannibal had taken everything from Will, his trust, his sense of self, his moral compass, and yet, he was offering Will the chance to decide for himself what his future would look like.

The choice was Will's to make, Hannibal was saying without words.

Will didn't know what to do with that. His body ached, his mind even more so, but it was the gnawing uncertainty in his chest that left him hollow.

How could he choose?

How could he move forward when everything felt so tangled, so wrong?

As the day wore on, Hannibal remained at his side, a silent sentinel, letting Will rest. There would be no pressure from him, no more lies, no more games, at least for now. It was Will's life, his path to choose.

But Hannibal would be there, waiting, no matter what.

-

A few hours had passed, and Will still hadn't spoken to Hannibal.

Hannibal stood by Will's hospital bed, meticulously reviewing the medical charts as the attending doctor explained Will's condition. Will caught fragments of the conversation, his attention mostly turned inward, trying to block out Hannibal's presence. But he could feel it —an unmistakable weight in the room.

"His recovery has been steady," Dr. Harper said, glancing between Hannibal and Will. "But there's still a lot of healing ahead. The shoulder wound is deep, and while the surgery was successful, we need to remain vigilant for infection and monitor for any complications."

Hannibal nodded, his face a mask of calm authority. "Thank you, doctor. Will has endured more than most men can bear." His voice was cool, controlled, but laced with an undertone that made the doctor shift nervously.

"We've prescribed pain management and sedatives to keep him comfortable," Dr. Harper added. "We're also ensuring minimal stress as part of his recovery."

Will's eyelids fluttered open slightly, his body heavy and sluggish from the medication. He didn't turn to look at Hannibal, but he felt his presence beside him, a constant, unshakable shadow.

Hannibal stepped closer to the doctor, lowering his voice but not enough for Will to miss. "Will's mental and emotional state is fragile. He should not be subjected to any external

pressures, especially from law enforcement. I will ensure he has the space he needs to recover."

Dr. Harper hesitated, clearly uncomfortable under Hannibal's scrutiny. "The police have been insistent, but we've managed to—"

"I will handle the police," Hannibal interrupted smoothly. "Will's well-being is my responsibility, and I will not permit any interference."

Will's eyes closed again, but he could still feel Hannibal's gaze boring into him, his presence overwhelming. The brief, possessive touch of Hannibal's hand on his sent a shiver down his spine. It was subtle, but it said more than words could.

The doctor nodded quickly, sensing the unspoken dismissal. "Of course, Dr. Lecter. We'll continue to monitor him closely."

As the door clicked shut behind Dr. Harper, Hannibal turned back to Will. His hand reached out, gently tucking a stray curl of Will's hair behind his ear. "You are stronger than you know, Will," Hannibal whispered, his voice a blend of affection and control. "Rest now. We'll speak when you're ready."

Will didn't respond. He lay still, eyes closed, wrestling with the growing awareness of Hannibal's influence over him. Even as he tried to ignore it, the connection between them lingered, undeniable and unbreakable.

-

The moment Will was cleared for discharge, he didn't know how to feel.

Hannibal stood by the door, his jacket draped neatly over his arm, his tie loosened just slightly, and his hair still immaculate despite the hint of a five o'clock shadow. It was a small

detail, but it told Will just how long Hannibal had been there, how long he had stayed, watching over him.

For Will, that time had been both a blessing and a curse.

The silence they shared in the hospital room allowed Will to reflect, to think about everything, away from the prying eyes of the police.

He knew Dave was waiting, eager for answers, desperate to catch the Chesapeake Ripper. But the longer Will sat with his thoughts, the more he began to understand the depths of Hannibal's actions.

The killings, the cannibalism, it wasn't a monstrous facade. It was simply a part of Hannibal, as intrinsic to him as the alpha who rose early to make sure Will had breakfast every morning, who made sure the dogs were fed and watered.

Turning Hannibal in now, when they were mated, would lead to even more bloodshed. More violence.

Will would be condemned alongside him, and the thought of being torn apart by the system felt futile. Hannibal would never stay in prison. There wasn't a force on earth that could keep them apart for long.

Only Will could.

So when the doctors finally cleared him to leave the hospital, Will had a plan. He didn't know every detail yet, but he knew one thing, what he needed to do.

As he followed Hannibal out of the hospital, Will's mind churned quietly, piecing together his next steps, even as he felt the weight of Hannibal's unwavering presence beside him.

Will moved slowly, the ache in his shoulder persistent despite the medication.

Hannibal's hand lingered at his back, both guiding and steadying him. As they pulled out of the hospital parking lot, Will let his head rest against the window, hoping for the brief solace of being away from the chaos.

But that peace was short-lived.

Before they could make it far, the flashing lights of a police car stopped them. Hannibal pulled the car to a halt, his grip tightening slightly on the steering wheel. He didn't speak, but Will could feel his irritation simmering just beneath the surface.

A familiar figure approached: Dave. His expression was tense but apologetic as he leaned down to Will's window.

"Hey, Will. I'm sorry to bother you, but I need you to come down to the station," Dave said, glancing at Hannibal, then back to Will. "We picked up a guy near the crime scene the night we found you. There are… inconsistencies in his story. We need you to take a look at a lineup. See if anything jogs your memory."

Will's brow furrowed. He had been in such a daze that night, so much had happened. His mind was still reeling, and the thought of going through the station process felt like too much.

"I'm taking Will home to rest," Hannibal interjected smoothly, his voice laced with calm authority. "He has been through enough."

Dave's eyes flickered, aware of Hannibal's protective stance but resolute. "I understand that, Dr. Lecter, but this could be important. We have reason to believe the man we arrested was involved, and Will's the best person to help us figure that out. We won't push him too hard, just a quick look at the lineup."

"Let's get it out of the way," Will spoke solemnly.

Hannibal's gaze remained fixed on Dave, cold and unreadable. "I will accompany him."

Dave nodded, sensing the tension. "Alright. We'll keep it brief. Thanks, Will. This could really help the case."

With a heavy sigh, Will nodded reluctantly.

Hannibal steered the car toward the police station, his hand moving to touch Will's own, both grounding and possessive. "You don't have to do this, Will," he said, his voice soft but laden with meaning.

Will glanced at him, tension radiating through his body. His gaze shifted to the road ahead. "Do you think I'm going to turn you in now?" he muttered, his voice low and strained, the weight of everything they'd been through thick in his tone.

Hannibal's lips curved into a slight, knowing smile. "No," he replied, his voice calm, almost soothing. "I think you understand now. Turning me in wouldn't solve anything. We are… connected, in ways they could never comprehend."

Will clenched his jaw, feeling the familiar pull between them, the tangled web of emotions that had grown stronger with every lie, every shared secret. "I'm not turning you in," he admitted quietly. "But this doesn't mean I've accepted everything."

Hannibal's grip on his hand tightened ever so slightly, a silent acknowledgment of the battle Will was still waging within himself. "In time, you will," Hannibal said, his voice soft, almost reverent. "You will come to see, as I dol."

Will remained silent as they drove through the gray morning streets, his mind a whirlpool of fragmented thoughts. Hannibal's presence was a silent shadow, steady and unwavering.

The silence between them wasn't strained, but it was full of the things Will didn't want to acknowledge, the truths he had glimpsed and the lies he had told himself. He kept his eyes forward, letting the city blur by as they approached the station.

Dave met them at the entrance, a curt nod between old colleagues, but there was no camaraderie today. "Straight to the back," Dave muttered, leading them down a narrow hallway.

The sound of buzzing lights and muffled voices was the only thing that followed them.

When they entered the room, a line of suspects stood on the other side of the glass, backs straight, faces blank.

Will scanned them without seeing them, his focus sliding past them, instead catching Hannibal's reflection in the one-way mirror.

That calm, unreadable expression.

Will's pulse quickened as he stared at Hannibal's reflection, antlers blooming from the shadows under the fluorescent lights.

Dave was waiting, his posture tense. He wanted Will to point, to identify the monster who had carved open lives and left bodies in twisted forms of art.

But the real monster stood beside him, solid and familiar.

Will's mouth felt dry.

"I don't remember," Will finally said, his voice hollow. "I can't… I just remember Dave at the scene. I was out of it." He turned away from the glass, meeting Dave's eyes with a blank expression. "I'm sorry."

Dave's face tightened with frustration, but he didn't push. "You were hurt, Will. It's okay." His tone suggested otherwise, but he nodded, letting Will off the hook. "Get some rest. We'll handle it from here."

Will murmured his thanks, his eyes sliding once more to the glass before he followed Hannibal out of the room.

As they made their way back through the station, Will caught sight of FBI agents in another room, carefully collecting case files, the Ripper case drawing in even more attention.

Will's heart sank, a quiet dread settling deeper inside him.

Hannibal noticed too. His sharp gaze flickered toward the agents, registering the shift in the investigation. But he remained silent, just as Will did.

They both knew what this meant. The walls were closing in. But for whom?

They reached the car, and Will climbed in, settling into the passenger seat without a word.

Hannibal followed, starting the engine with the same calm efficiency he always had. The drive home was as silent as their departure, but beneath the stillness, Will could feel the weight of Hannibal's thoughts, his unspoken plans.

As the city faded behind them, Will stared out the window, wondering how long he could live with the truth he had chosen to ignore. He had denied the inevitable back in that lineup room, and in doing so, he had crossed a line.

He had chosen Hannibal.

But as the road stretched out ahead of them, Will knew he wasn't ready to face what that truly meant.

-

The following morning, Hannibal prepared for work with his usual calm precision, though his thoughts lingered on Will.

He moved quietly through the house, aware that Will had locked himself in the guest bedroom with the dogs.

It wasn't a prison, not physically. Will had chosen the solitude, had made the decision to withdraw, and Hannibal, in his infinite patience, allowed it.

He knew he had to wait. Will was processing, searching for answers, and in time, Hannibal knew, Will would come to him.

He always would.

With one final glance at the closed door of the guest room, Hannibal left the house, locking the front door behind him as if sealing the world away from Will's turmoil.

His day passed as any other, filled with patients and the routine of his work. But beneath the surface, his thoughts were never far from home, from the fractured bond between him and Will.

When Hannibal returned that evening, he immediately sensed a shift.

The house was too quiet, the absence of Will's presence immediate and sharp. The dogs were silent, their usual greeting absent, and Hannibal's eyes flicked to the driveway.

The Continental was gone.

A slow, measured breath escaped him as he stood in the entryway, taking in the scene.

Will had left.

It wasn’t entirely unexpected; in fact, Hannibal had anticipated it.

Will needed space to grapple with the truth he was running from.

There was no need to chase him, Hannibal understood better than anyone the art of patience.

He walked to the guest room, opening the door and stepping inside.

The faint scent of Will still lingered in the air, a mix of cinnamon, verbena and something distinctly him.

The dogs gone, but Hannibal knew they were with Will. They would protect him where Hannibal couldn’t. pacing by the bed as if sensing the absence too, but

Hannibal found comfort in the traces Will had left behind.

He stood for a moment, simply breathing in the lingering scent, a quiet smile playing on his lips.

Will could run as far as he liked, but Hannibal knew this wasn’t the end. It was merely a part of the journey they were both on.

The bond between them was too strong, too complex to be broken by distance or fear.

When Will was ready, when he had come to terms with the darkness inside him, he would return.

And Hannibal would be waiting.

-

“I’ll take it,” Will said, his voice steady as he gazed at the modest home before him.

It wasn’t anything remarkable, but it had exactly what he needed.

The yard was spacious, perfect for the dogs to roam freely. A river ran just behind the property, providing a serene, natural backdrop that made Wolf Trap feel secluded and peaceful.

The distance from Hannibal was intentional, far enough to create a buffer between the life he was trying to build and the one he was leaving behind.

Will knew, deep down, that Hannibal would never physically harm him. That wasn’t the threat that haunted his thoughts.

This place felt secure, like a fresh start. There were no close neighbors to pry or judge, no one to ask questions about his past.

It was quiet, isolated.

Here, Will could begin to piece together the fragments of his life, without Hannibal's shadow constantly looming over him. He could feel safe for the first time in what felt like years.

But even as Will surveyed the house, his thoughts wandered.

He knew Hannibal's nature all too well, his persistence, his possessiveness. It wasn't that he feared Hannibal in the traditional sense.

He feared how easily Hannibal could unravel him, how every barrier he put up could be quietly dismantled, leaving him vulnerable.

Hannibal wouldn't stop.

Hannibal would never let anything come between what he believed to be his.

Will clenched his jaw, staring out at the river. Here, at least, he could carve out some space for himself, away from the suffocating intensity that had become his life.

For now, Wolf Trap was his sanctuary. How long that peace would last, he didn't know. But for now, it was enough.

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